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FOUND DEAD.



FOUND DEAD.



BY THE AUTHOR OF

'BLONDEL PARVA,' 'LOST SIR MASSINGBERD,'
'MARRIED BENEATH HIM,' ETC., ETC.

10.5.1

LONDON :

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND
1869.

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250. W. 172

LONDON

PRINTED BY W. H. SMITH AND SON, 186, STRAND.

TO
WILLIAM LETHBRIDGE, Esq.,
THIS BOOK
IS CORDIALLY DEDICATED
BY THE AUTHOR.



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FOUND DEAD.

CHAPTER I.

AN EARLY BREAKFAST.

IT is November—the month we English love least of all the year. To us, indeed, who dwell in cities, it is often a mere shape of fog and vapours, an omen portentous to the human race of lumbago and the rheumatism. On Lord Mayor's Day, it might be that among the many rare dishes at the Mansion House the Albatross was one, so certain are the snow and mist to follow. But in the country, things are not quite so bad. Here, at Allgrove on the Rill, for instance, there is mist, but not so thick as to conceal the local beauties, or, at least, those which lie immediately around. From Morden Hall, our squire's house, to one who stands at its front door, the rich park, drenched in dew, swells vaguely up towards the downland, itself half-hill half-cloud, but slopes distinct enough to the full river's edge. The osier isle is seen, and half the fairer

wooded island midway in the stream. For the most part, the ferry-boat slides in and out the ghastly mist like Charon's wherry ; but when nature lifts her gauzy veil coquettishly, the *Angler's Rest*—the ferry-house and inn—appears on the opposite bank.

Sounds, too, though dulled by the vaporous air, give note of much that is invisible, and to the mind at least, enlarge the scene. The lasher in the back stream sends forth its muffled thunder, and from the streaming woods comes, and is repeated by the sullen echoes, the thud of the sportsman's gun. Nay, even at early dawn, when all is yet obscure, and nature, like mankind, is scarce aroused, the November day is dear to such as are fox-hunters. The cloudy sky and the miry clay have charms for them, unknown to the very poets themselves, high-priests of nature though they be. Squire Blissett, as he stands at his hall-porch booted and spurred, to look forth on the gloomy morn, sees beauties in it which would appeal in vain to any bard, except, perhaps, Somerville, who wrote *The Chase*. He sniffs the misty air, almost like the hounds he burns to follow, and drives his heel into the hoary gravel ; and mutters, that though the frost is not out of the ground, the day will do. He says this with the air of one who has been contradicted. 'It will be dangerous riding, Frank, dear,' was the extent of his anxious spouse's opposition ; but, indeed, he is secretly aware that such will be the case. The frost has been severe throughout the week, and yesterday only has as yet given sign of change. Squire Frank would hunt on Wenham Lake rather than not hunt at all ; but still he does express a hope that the fox will

keep to the vale to-day, where it is softer falling for man and horse. To look at him makes us wish it too, that he may be pleased ; so genial is his ruddy face, so kind and bright his Saxon eyes, and the voice—though it is famous for its view holloa—has so winsome a tone. No wonder that everybody should take to Frank at first sight, and be glad to return the hearty pressure of his honest hand. Moreover, the more you get to know him, the better you like him ; for though, supposing you were a philosopher (which would be supposing a great deal in an Allgrove neighbour), you might soon get to the bottom of the squire's wits, it would be difficult to fathom his heart, and discover where his good nature and generosity come to an end. He gives time to his tenants, and money to his poor ; and when he dies, the world will lose, if not a saint, a man that is greatly below the average of sinners. Though not without his troubles and drawbacks, that air of vigour and plenty about him is well warranted. He has never passed a day in bed through illness during his half-century of life ; and with the exception of a passing twinge, now in the ball of a toe, now in the point of a finger, has even kept off his hereditary foe, the gout.

As to wealth, he is a rich man for a squire, because his moderate estate is free from claims ; but 'the Hall' is rather an ambitious term for his residence, and likewise 'the Park' for the grounds in which it stands. Perhaps Frank Blissett has three thousand a year in land. But then he spends every penny of his income, which a man who has only a life-interest in such a property is imprudent to do.

Morden Hall is entailed upon heirs male, and the squire has only one child, Christie, who is unfortunately (though her name might be the short for Christopher instead of Christina) a girl, and his wife is now no longer young, and besides is an invalid. This last circumstance is the principal trouble which afflicts honest Frank, and perhaps the only one which dashes his spirits whenever he thinks about it, and that is often. His wife has a sort of paralytic affection, brought on (the doctors say) through lying in a bed insufficiently aired. This took place in an out-of-the-way part of the north country, where Mrs. Blissett had accompanied her husband on a sporting excursion, and he always reproached himself with being the cause of her malady. 'I persuaded her like a selfish beast as I am,' was his mode of explaining the circumstance, 'to go to the Yorkshire moors with me in the late October—fancy dear Lotty "roughing it" with such a fellow as I, whom nothing hurts—and now, thanks to me, she is a cripple for life.' But the case is not in reality quite so bad as the squire puts it against himself, and besides, there are hopes of his lady's recovery.

There is no heir to Morden Hall except Frank's only brother, Frederick Blissett, a bachelor, and, though considerably his junior, not at all likely to outlive him, for his constitution has suffered from Indian life, and now he has come home he does not take much care of it.

'I am glad I sent Robert on with the mare last night to Newnham,' quoth the squire chuckling, as he closed the door, and walked across the still dusky hall

towards the parlour called his 'study.' 'I must say I am always right——'

'Well done, papa!' interrupted a laughing voice, and a pair of loving arms were cast about his neck on the instant, and a kiss imprinted on his wholesome cheek.

'What a wonder of a father it is to be always right! How pleased dear mamma will be when I tell her what I heard him say.'

'You wicked Puss,' exclaimed the squire, holding his pretty daughter at arm's length, as a connoisseur does a picture, 'how dare you make fun of an aged parent! If you had only waited till I had finished my sentence, you would have learned that I only pretend to infallibility as respects the weather. I stuck to it yesterday against Parson Mellish that it would do to hunt this morning, and backed my opinion by sending on Robert with the mare yesterday; and now, you see, I'm right, and the parson and all the rest of you were wrong. But what on earth calls *you* up at this time in the morning, Christie? I particularly gave orders that only William and the cook need disturb themselves.'

'And who is to make your breakfast, I should like to know? What! my papa do it all himself? You *know* he never could. He would forget to put the tea in the pot, or give himself too much sugar, which is so bad for his gout. No, no; mamma and I conspired together about it over night; and see, here are the keys, and I am the mistress of the house; so please to be respectful, Sir!'

Never had commonplace country mansion more fairy-like a mistress than Christie Blissett, aged sixteen,

but with nothing as yet of the gravity or self-consciousness of the woman about her. Slight and small for her years, and delicately though proportionately shaped, her manner had all the sprightliness and innocent *abandon* of a child. Like a roguish robin perched in a laburnum tree, her hazel eyes peered through her auburn hair, as, in pretended ire, she shook her luxuriant and untrammelled locks about her face, and held up one tiny reproving finger.

'It is very good of you, my darling Christie,' returned her father, 'to get up and make my breakfast; but I fear you will have a long day of it when I am gone.'

'There he is again, and here is more fun for dear mamma!' cried Christie joyously. 'First, he is always right; and secondly, the time must needs seem always long to everybody in his absence. Well, it *is* long, you dear old papa, and that is a fact; but I dare say we shall survive the day. The first thing when you're gone, I shall have to give my report up stairs, you know. "Did he make a good breakfast?" So, please, let there be plenty of items; eggs, two; kidneys, four—for there *are* kidneys, you see; we made a point of that with cook—buttered toast, *three* rounds—less than that will make dear mamma sigh—bread and marmalade without discretion. And, dear me, here's a curry, a dish made after Uncle Frederick's own receipt; that *must* be an item.'

It was a curious scene (and in after-years Christie never forgot it) that well-furnished table laid out in the snug parlour, with lamps lit, and curtains closed against the dusky morn, and the squire sitting down in his red coat, as though it was supper after a masquerade.

Christie had often made breakfast for her father before on his hunting mornings, but never by candlelight ; for the fact was, the meet at Newnham was a very long way off, beyond the squire's usual radius, only his long abstinence had made him ravenous for sport. So there they sat, the squire eating like a true fox-hunter, and his daughter talking like a true woman, while the lights within fought with the growing dawn. There was plenty of time for talking and eating, for the breakfast had been served, as everything else was done in that household, with rigorous punctuality.

'Is Uncle Frederick coming down here this Christmas, papa ?'

'Upon my life, I don't know, my darling.' There was not a trace of irritation in the speaker's manner ; but it would have been plain to the most careless listener that the subject was, for some reason or other, a distasteful one. Christie, more sensitive than the most delicate of electrician's instruments, trembled like the needle ere it obeys the magnet, and then kept silence. She was not in the least afraid of her father ; she knew he could never be angry with her. But it was absolute pain to her to embarrass, far less annoy her fellow creatures. Like her mother, she had an exquisite tact—an attribute very rare in women, notwithstanding the popular belief to the contrary—only in Christie's nature this was in excess, and she suffered for it. 'I asked Fred to come down this very day ; but the fact is,' continued the squire apologetically, 'I don't think he'll do it. He and your dear mother, Christie, don't pull well together, somehow. There is much to admire about him too ;

he has run away with all the talent of my side of the house. Everybody allows what a clever fellow he is. What a picture that is, for instance, that hangs opposite to you, and which I am looking at in the glass ! Well, your uncle painted every stroke of it.'

'Yes, papa ; but I never could quite make out what it means.'

'Of course not, my darling ; that's because you've got no genius. There was never an historical picture painted yet which did not require explanation. I mean to poor country people like you and me. We are only fit to buy them.'

'If anybody else had said that, papa, I should have said he was very sarcastic !'

'Sarcastic'—stuff and nonsense. I mean just what I say. When your Uncle Fred and I were boys, and he (notwithstanding that he really can sit a horse very tolerably) used to attempt to teach me how to ride across country, I always said, "Pooh, pooh ! teach your grandmother to suck eggs." So I should say now about the management of my land, and even about politics, so far at least as they concern us farmers. But as to matters of Art, I am dumb before him. He tells me this is good, and that is bad, and I believe him. He once took me to Hampton Court to see the cartoons, and though, for my part, I much prefer the sign of the *Angler's Rest* over the water yonder—a very pretty piece, to my mind—yet I am content to allow that those huge ungainly forms and masses of flesh are an immense credit to Mr. Raphael. Only, not being my brother's, I did not offer to buy them, my dear, as I did this one. What Fred admires,

I admire ; but what is his own, and he can't get rid of to other folks, I buy. Not, you will understand, that your uncle's works do not deserve patronage, only he paints (after his friend Mr. R.) such deuced big pictures, that people have not large enough rooms to hang them in. That archbishop, for instance, who is coming to such grief—being knocked on the head with a poleaxe, as it seems to me—must be at least seven feet high ; and the gentleman in armour, who shows such disrespect for the cloth, half a foot higher. The names of the parties I have forgotten, but the scene is the cathedral of Cracovia ; and if you don't know where Cracovia is, Christie, all I can say is, you are as great an ignoramus as your father !' Laughing merrily, the squire emptied his second cup of tea, and rose from table. 'It seems a shame to wake her, but I think I shall just wish your mother good-bye before I start—eh, Christie ?'

'O yes, papa ; she had much rather you did that in any case, I am sure. But she is not asleep ; I heard her bell ring some minutes ago.'

'Dear, dear, I wish she would spare herself a little, Christie. One would think she was in the rudest health to hear how she gives orders about everything.—What is it, Jane ?'

'O please, Sir, I was to tell Miss Christie to put you in mind of your sherry-flask, in case you hadn't time to come up and wish missis "good-bye."'

'I'll come, I'll come,' returned the squire hastily. 'Just say I'm coming, will you, Jane ? God bless her dear heart and soul ; the idea of one's not having time to wish *her* "good-bye."'



CHAPTER II.

GOOD-BYE.

A PRETTY little room was Mrs. Blissett's—half-boudoir, half-bed-room, with one window looking westward upon the winding Rill, and one on the belt of trees topped by the church steeple, and through whose leafless branches could be seen (though not just yet, for it is dusk) a roof or two, and a few wreaths of smoke, which marked the village. The birds knew those windows well, and hopping on the sills in evil weather, twittered their thanks for what they found upon them, and all the summer long, from the fruit-garden underneath, they sent up grateful songs to her who would not have them slain, nor grudged them plum nor peach. The busiest sounds of life that reached the Hall came hither first: the ring of the smith's anvil, and of every nail that he drove home in horse's shoe; the gossip of the mill-wheel; the smack, that means no harm, of the carter's whip, when starting from the farmyard; the beat of oars upon the river. This was all that the squire's wife had known of outer life for years; but oh, how welcome was the news!

All day, all night, throughout the weary year, she kept to that single room, except upon her husband's birthday, when she would be carried, couch and all, to dine with him and Christie. But not Cæsar's self had a more indomitable spirit than this sick lady ; she never moaned or winced in her worst pain ; she guided all the house, holding the intricate reins of management with skill and firmness ; she audited accounts, she saw that there was plenty and no waste ; reproved and praised. Few households with howsoever hawk-eyed mistresses, fitting here, there, and everywhere, were better ruled than Morden Hall. Above all, never were husband's comforts studied and provided for as Frank Blissett's were by his sick wife. She educated Christie, as no governess could do : enlarged her heart while she informed her mind ; but one thing she taught her, more than all, to see that, in those things wherein it was not possible for his wife to serve him, her father was well served. It seemed to some that this poor lady's aim was to remedy to him to the utmost the shortcoming of her misfortune, to make him forget that he had a crippled wife ; but such folks knew not how to estimate this woman's love. The squire had more discernment, and besides, he knew she had been the same devoted soul when hale and well. ' I am my Lotty's idol ; and fortunately for me, she can never see the feet of clay, Heaven help her, but takes all for gold.'

But there was gold about him too. How light the firm tread grows as he draws nigh her door ; how gently his huge fingers knock, how softly turn the handle, and in that darkened room, how like a ray of sunshine shines his loving face !

'I am come to say good-bye, my darling: do not try to rise.'

She would have sat up to throw her wasted arms about him, but that he hastily knelt down and placed himself within their reach.

'Did you find everything nice and comfortable, Frank, down stairs? Did Christie make your tea? You got my message about the sherry—I was so afraid you might forget it.'

'My precious pet, I have been well looked after, indeed, and have eaten like an ogre. But what is of much more consequence, how are *you*? Did you sleep nicely? I thought I heard you move uneasily about midnight.'

'I did not disturb you, dear, I trust?' returned she, with an anxious, almost frightened look at the door of communication between her husband's bed-room and her own. 'How stupid of me not to have lain still!'

'Don't talk like that, please, Lotty. You look very pale; I almost think I'll stop at home to-day!'

'What! for *me*, Frank? Never. I am better—much better than usual. Perhaps—some day—if God will—I may be quite well again. Dear, dear husband; forgive me—you will never come and wish me good-bye again, if I behave like this. It is time that you should start, I know. You have a long way to ride; and don't ride fast, dear Frank, where the ground is very hard.—Shall you be *very* late, dear, coming home, do you think?'

'Well, darling, I am afraid you must order supper for me rather than dinner. You see it's fifteen miles

to Newnham ; and then there's no knowing which way the fox may take. And by-the-bye, Lotty—I don't think it *likely*, mind, but it is *possible* that I may bring Fred home with me. I told him that if he took the train to Newnham, I could give him a mount to-day ; and, in that case, of course, he will come back with me to-night.'

'Very well, dear : a room shall be got ready.'

If there was a shadow of disagreement in the sunshine of their married life, it was upon the subject of Brother Fred, and even that arose out of their love ; for Mrs. Blissett did not think Mr. Frederick had a nice way with her husband, whose opinions, indeed, he was accustomed to treat with some contempt ; she had often felt the shaft, when it missed altogether the kind heart at which it was aimed, and the wounds rankled within her. Moreover, she was aware, although not to their full extent, of the large sums again and again advanced by the squire to supply his brother's needs, if dissipation and extravagance can so be termed ; and without entertaining any of that so common feminine jealousy of seeing 'money go out of the family,' it galled her to know these benefits were ill acknowledged, or taken as a right.

Conscious of the existence of these feelings in his wife's mind respecting Brother Fred, the squire had put off the information that he had invited him to Allgrove to this last moment, and even now communicated it like a skater who has a piece of thin ice to cross, and is glad to get over it.

'Is there anything I can do for you in Newnham, Lotty?'

'Nothing, darling. But mind you don't forget about the coin.'

'Bless my soul!' cried the squire, 'I *had* clean forgotten it! The fact is, my memory is no use to me with a wife like you, and therefore it gets quite out of working order. And who did you say I was to show it to?' [The squire's grammar was of the agricultural sort.] O yes; I *do* remember that. To old Dr. Fungus. He's sure to be at the meet on his little pony, with that blue-cotton umbrella under his arm. If they don't put him in that picture of our Hunt, I'm hanged if I buy a single print of it! They have served me a very scurvy trick, in my opinion, in not employing Fred, and I have half a mind, as it is, not to put my name down on the subscription list.'

'But Frederick is not an animal painter, my dear Frank.'

'Well, what of that? The doctor's not an animal—though, by-the-bye, I am not quite sure of that; he certainly does not look like an ordinary human being—but, at all events, I'm not an animal, nor the rest of the Hunt members. Why could not they have given Fred the men to paint, and got another fellow to do the hounds and horses?—Where *is* this confounded coin, if it is a coin, dear Lotty?'

'You put it in your dressing-table drawer, last night, my love?'

'Yes, there it is.'

'It's a piece of solid silver, I feel quite sure.'

'I should be better pleased if it had the Hall mark upon it, Lotty; that is, if I were Jem Templar.'

'Why, you dear foolish fellow, it would be then

only worth its weight in silver. It is certainly a coin, and one of extreme antiquity. Jem found it in his potato-ground just at the corner of the Druid Stone. There seems to be a horse upon it.'

'Well, Lotty, I dare say you're right, but I should be very sorry to go a-hunting on such a nag.'

'Yes, Frank,' continued his wife, who had got the coin in her hand, and was examining it minutely; 'there is a man, and there is a horse.'

'Hengist and Horsa,' exclaimed the squire, with sudden impetuosity. Then repentantly: 'O lor, what a fool I am! They were brothers, weren't they? I quite forgot.'

'You dear old dunce, you are always quite forgetting. And yet, somehow, I wouldn't have you remember, Frank. I wouldn't have you not speak without thinking. I wouldn't have you altered in any one particular: I love you so, just as you are.'

'And yet you made me give five guineas to our parson's Society for Mutual Improvement!' returned the squire comically.

'Yes, Frank; but where is it to hold its meetings?'

'True, my darling. That old room is very dear to me, and I should not have liked it to go to rack and ruin. How well I remember our first meeting there! You had a stall at that bazaar for the restoration of the church, and you cheated me doubly in the first transaction that we had together; for you charged me much too high for the cigar-case—it was a good one, though, for, see, I carry it to this day—and when you reached your hand across the counter, stole my heart.'

Their eyes met lovingly as he spoke, but his wife's

were bedewed with tears. 'I am afraid I cheated you trebly, my darling,' said she. 'You could not guess that you were to be linked for life with——' She cast a glance at her wasted form and helpless limbs, inexpressibly mournful.

'Lotty, Lotty,' exclaimed her husband pleadingly, 'how can you say such things! You cut me to the heart. Now, listen once for all. I see two pictures now before my eyes, one as distinctly as the other. I see my Lotty, a young girl, not seventeen, fresh as the morning, innocent as a daisy, beautiful as the daughter who is the pledge of our love; and I see you here twice those years, pale, thin, and suffering grievously (though I trust and pray, upon the road to health), and yet, God knows, I love you better thus; not because I pity you, not because I have to blame myself for your misfortune' (she put up her thin hand to stop him, but he hurried on), 'but because every day and hour has made you dearer to me, and (though *that* seems impossible) will somehow make you dearer and dearer yet until I die. Please, never, never say such cruel things again, Lotty; please, don't.'

The squire was looking out of window, and using his pocket-handkerchief, as if to wipe the dimness from the glass; but it was not only the window that was dim.

'Speaking of the big room going to rack and ruin,' continued he after a little, in more collected tones, but still with some remains of agitation, 'your own little cottage by the river, Lotty, wants looking to. I don't think much of the present tenant; he is a careless sort of fellow; and I am glad his term is up at

Christmas. It is a pity the little house should not be kept up, for the land about it is letting well, and the whole estate, they tell me, capable of great improvement. I had no idea you were such "a catch" when I married you. You have turned out quite an heiress, Lotty !'

'I am glad there is something to the credit side of my account,' returned the invalid laughing. 'Poor dear papa had always a high notion of that investment for his three thousand pounds, and therefore it was thought ill of by everybody else.'

'Well, my love, the dear doctor was not a very good man of business, that is certain ; but he was right in this particular case. I almost think I ought to increase your pin-money. But there, what's the good, when, as it is, you give half of it away ! I was an idiot not to build upon that land, as Lawyer Groves advised me, instead of improving the Morden property : then you would have had a decent provision, instead of a beggarly two hundred pounds a year, in case anything should happen to me.'

'O Frank, I wish you would not talk like that.'

'Very well, dear, I won't ; and indeed, I oughtn't to be talking at all, for I have no time to lose, if I am to mind your caution, and not ride fast where the ground is hardish. I hope I shall come back with a pocketful of silver for poor Jem, in exchange for this old-world bit of money ; but I must confess I put as little faith in its value as in the liberality of our friend with the blue gingham.—God bless my pet, and make her well and strong again ! Good-bye, dear Lotty !'

'Good-bye, dear husband ; and don't ride fast on

your way home in the dark. I had much rather you were late than——'

'Than never,' added the squire merrily. 'Better late than never, as the saying is. O yes, I'll take care of my precious neck. Good-bye, darling.'

Down the stairs, with no particular caution this time in respect to noise, but whistling as he went; then calling in the hall for Christie to fasten his hat-string to his button-hole, and lighting his cigar at the porch with sundry sentences between the puffs, addressed to the fat butler, as to the wine that must be got out in case Mr. Frederick should return to dinner, for the painter was fastidious in such matters. Then mounting, with a firm grip of the mane, slowly, though by no means inertly, into the saddle, he rode gaily away at a sharp trot. Christie had wished him good-bye a full minute before he started, and ran up stairs to her mother's room. She knew she would be wanted to wheel the couch to the west window, from which the invalid could watch her husband, mounted on his favourite bay, pass down the drive to the great gates, and afterwards along the high road, to the toll-bar, where the last gleam of his scarlet coat was lost among the trees, and left the wintry landscape cold and gray.



CHAPTER III.

GOING TO THE MEET.

NOTWITHSTANDING that the parting interview between 'Frank' and his 'Lotty' had extended to a limit which more befitted the leave-taking of two young lovers than that of a middle-aged couple, whereof one was a fox-hunter, it was still early in the November morning. As the squire trotted quietly through the straggling village, not a shop-front (and there were half-a-dozen in all) was as yet unclosed. The carters and labourers were already up and gone; the domestic servants had not made their appearance on the front-door steps. As he passed by the vicarage, there was but one window with its blind up; and from behind it Parson Mellish, shaving, gave him a friendly nod, and as much of a smile as the soap-suds would permit. He saw no other face in Allgrove. A sharp turn to the left, and the steep, though winding road had to be breasted which led on to the downland, after which almost the whole of his way lay over the hard turf, studded with mole-hills, that were but yesterday of iron, and seamed with huge

rut, whose first indentations had been made as likely as not by scythe-wheeled chariots. An out-of-the-way and old-world route indeed, now used only by sportsmen like himself, by drovers taking their vast flocks of sheep to Newnham Market, and now and then by some farmer in his jolting gig, whose sore-tried springs squeaked their disapprobation of the way. From some points of the high table-land, if it were not so foggy as it is to-day, you looked into the vales on either hand, and in each might see the heavy line of vapour that hung above the puffing steam-horse, as he ran from country town to country town; but for the most part there was nothing but patches of furze, and here and there a thorn-bush, to break the endless view of rolling down. In winter-time, along the dreary way, there was no sign of man, no house or hut—nothing beyond a lambing-box on wheels, or rotting shepherd's hurdle, its damp straw whirled and torn by the autumn wind—from Allgrove on the Rill to Newnham, except in one place, which the squire is now rapidly approaching; and a curious spot it is.

Imagine on this stoneless, treeless tract a little hamlet girt about with young plantations, and even showing a few potato-plots by way of garden—an oasis 'islanded amid the waste.' At a distance, the place looks quite a little town; but its wonder lies not in its population (for there are but four cottages in all), but in its wealth of building material. Dotted about in a vast circle, accurately planned, though here and there a stone is missing, like a tooth from a giant's jaw, are thirty Druid Stones, gigantic unhewn masses, the presence of every one of which in such a spot is little short

of a miracle, and suggests unheard-of labour. How did it get there? Without patent rollers—nay, without the simplest mechanical contrivances of modern times, how was so huge a mass transported to that desolate, wind-swept height? How many yoke of oxen, how many straining scores of men, must it have taken to erect the least of them! What submission to authority, what servile or superstitious fear, must have animated the workers! No drover's whip could have urged to such a task, no richest guerdon could have repaid the toil: yet there the wonder stands. Difficult, however, as may have been the erection of these monuments of antiquity, it is comparatively easy, by help of fire and water, and a blacksmith's hammer, to mutilate them, the consequence of which is that many of them are reduced to mere torsos. Every cottage is built of their *débris*, every wall is composed of them: the very gaps in the hedges are filled up with giant fragments; and the pigs for once are favoured with stone mansions. The whole of this mighty Circle stood on the squire's land, and I am sorry to say that, although he had a wholesome horror of reform, he had but little respect for antiquity; hence these depredations upon time, these chippings of sacred things, went on without rebuke.

As its owner rode by the venerable place, with its mystic masses looming through the mist more vast than usual, he thought not of what purposes it might of old have served: whether human victims had been sacrificed (as some learned men contended) on yonder mound; or whether (as others held) the bucks' horns and bones at times dug up there accounted for all the slain.

No coin had as yet been found there except that treasure-trove of Jem Templar's, which the squire had now in his pocket, with the object of disposing of it, to the best advantage of his tenant, to Dr. Fungus. But he had no time to speak to Jem about that now, but only nodded to him as he stood bare-headed in his little strip of garden. He was late for the meet, he knew, and trotted on apace down what was still called 'the Stone Avenue' (though the stones had disappeared), and close by the grassy heaps, beneath which had lain for so many centuries the believers in a creed out-worn. No, Frank Blissett thought not of Priest nor Victim, but threw shrewd glances at his young plantations, their green tops (although for so exposed a place the day was calm) already slanting southward, submissive to the prevalent wind. He only drew rein once, to tuck his hunting-whip beneath his thigh, and light a fresh cigar, then cantered on, to make up for lost time.

This simple, honest, country gentleman was within half an hour to be made wiser than all that live upon the earth; to reap the so common, and yet unknown experience of the Grave; to pass the Gates of Death, and perhaps of Heaven. That good-bye to his wife, so God had willed it, was to be their last adieu; that wave of his hand to the parson, that nod of his head to the poor hind, were to be his last farewells to his fellow-creatures. But he only reflected that the ground was still very hard, and only regretted that the scent would lie so ill, just as the rest of us to whom sudden Death is beckoning, unseen, for the most part do reflect and regret, though the objects of

our thoughts may not be fox-hunting. The way is more lonely now than ever, and descends into a hollow called Burslem Bottom, a mere trough of turf-road between high-sloping banks, but of such exceeding length, that the clump of fir trees now hid in fog that crowns the hill at its other extremity, is within sight of Newnham, and 'When I get there,' mutters the unconscious squire, 'I shall hear the hounds if they have thrown off and found.'

But he never reached Newnham Clump, nor probably beheld it.





CHAPTER IV.

COMING HOME.

ROBERT the groom has lived with his master long, and knows him well, and much he wonders that the squire, who had seemed so set upon his sport but yesterday, should have changed his mind, and staid at home. His orders were, in case the squire should be late, to go to the meet, and there change horses with his master, unless Mr. Frederick should arrive, in which case Robert would have to give up his mare to *him* and go home on *foot*; but the hounds have met and drawn one cover, and still, though the fog has cleared, and the day is fine, and the ground is better than could have been expected, it is plain that Mr. Blissett is not coming. There is a whimper in the copse outside of which the groom has placed himself, and then another and another, and the big brown he sits pricks her pointed ears, and stamps the ground, and the blood comes to Robert's cheek, and his eyes grow wistful, horse and man feeling like one; but now that the hounds have found, and, as it seems, are breaking cover in the direction

opposite to Allgrove, all hope of master's coming has faded, and there is nothing for it but to turn rein, and be off home. This idea the big brown combats with much excitement and persistency, both her fore-legs raised appealingly in the air against her rider's view of the matter, and covering her bit with foam, in frantic endeavour to express herself, till good-natured Robert loses patience, and cutting her over the head with the whip, and growling 'Quiet, you precious fool!' turns her right round, and gives her the spur.

Up the slippery chalk road to Newnham Clump, beyond which and all along Burslem Bottom the fog hangs heavily still; so heavily that for a moment Robert almost thinks his master may have been lost in it, as strangers in those parts not seldom are, but not such as Frank Blissett, to whom, day and night, and storm and shine, upon the downs are almost as one. It is only the dazzling snow, crossing and re-crossing, and coming from all quarters at once, that can puzzle the squire, and there has been no snow as yet, although it is quite cold enough for a fall. So Robert descends into the mist, with a slight shiver ('Some goose must be walking over my grave,' says he: 'nothing surely can have *happened to master*'), and the big brown having given up the point of hunting altogether, begins to sniff and snort—for she knows Burslem Bottom as well as her own manger—and can scarcely be induced to go slowly enough down that greasy hill (for that is her rider's term for it) which leads towards her far-off stable. In the Bottom itself, the mist is so thick that it is almost like riding through a woollen comforter, and so dark that one cannot see

ten paces in advance, albeit the sky immediately above, for it is nearly noon, has one round spot in it as red as blood, which is doing duty for the sun.

‘Quiet!’ exclaims the groom impatiently. ‘Stop that noise, *will* you?’ and he reins in his mare to listen. Some noise coming from out the mist beyond has struck, or seemed to strike, his ear, but is not repeated; and on they go, this time in silence, for the brown perceives that her rider is not in the best of tempers, and these humans, she knows, are not to be trifled with. The fact is, Robert is deep in thought with reference to a certain pot of paste for cleaning top-boots, that has been presented to him this morning by a brother-groom, the greatest discovery of the age, as he has been given to understand, and which is expected to bring in about five-and-twenty thousand a-year or so to its fortunate inventor. Now, Robert himself has a private receipt for such paste, of which his master (and the squire ought to know, if any man ought) has always expressed his high approbation; and why, Robert would like to enquire of universal nature—with a sensation of having hitherto had his light concealed under a bushel—should not *he* too take out letters-patent, or the deuce knows what it is called, and realise a fortune, if not to the amount specified, still sufficient to insure the consent of the lodge-keeper’s daughter, who has at present, acting under paternal advice, declined to listen to his addresses?

She would keep company with him willingly enough, would Polly; and as to that old curmudgeon, her father, if only this paste for top-boots should turn out to

be a success it would smooth the path of true love, and——

‘Darn you, what’s the matter with you, you confounded fool!’ exclaimed he aloud, as the brown stood stock still and winnied again and again; and out from the gloom beyond came an answering winny and the sound of galloping feet, and presently there loomed out of the mist the form of a riderless horse; and upon the instant, with a chill at his honest heart, Robert knew it was his master’s bay. The bridle streamed behind him torn in twain, with a black mark where he had set his foot upon it; the empty stirrups (for the squire was a long-legged man) clanged together beneath him; his eyes, though full of recognition, flashed excitement; his flanks were bathed in sweat, and yet he shivered. ‘Woo, hoss, woo!’ said the groom mechanically, turning his anxious eyes around, for the something which he well knew had frightened the trusty beast. ‘*Master—master!*’ cried he through his hollowed hands. ‘Squire *Blissett!*—Squire *Blissett!*’ But there was no reply. The horses rubbed their noses together, as it is the fashion of some nations to salute, and the bay grew calm at once, as though all responsibility was now off his shoulders, and the matter placed in safe hands. Leading the bay, and riding the brown, the groom walked slowly on, peering fearfully before him, till presently he was almost thrown to the ground by the sudden and violent swerving of both horses to the right. On the left lay some object under the high bank, which he could not get them to approach. He therefore dismounted, and knotting their reins toge-

ther, tied them to the lash of his hunting whip, and with its handle tightly clutched, came forward to the spot alone.

There lay Squire Blissett, of Morden Hall, upon his face, with a wound at the back of his head, wide enough to let out ten men's lives. Horror-struck as he was, Robert knelt down at once, and satisfied himself that his master was dead indeed. 'God help him, and God help poor missis,' exclaimed he with a great burst of tears. Then leaving the poor corpse with its glassy eyes to the sky, he remounted the brown, and casting off the bay, to follow or not as it would, rode back along the way he came at headlong speed. Cleaving the mist as though it were blue air, he flew along the Bottom, and up the dangerous hill towards Newnham Clump, while the loose horse thundered at his heels. Such was the poor groom's intense excitement, that he was within that minute period of time and space which is called 'an ace' of riding down a man and horse coming from the opposite direction, and descending the hill with the most cautious leisure. The rider was a little old man with a white hat, the upturned brim of which showed a blue lining. He wore blue spectacles, albeit the sun was not in a condition to injure the weakest eyesight; and he had a blue cotton umbrella of great size tucked under his arm.

'Thank Heaven, it's Dr. Fungus!' exclaimed Robert fervently as the brown, perceiving the obstacle, stopped short, and nearly shot her rider from the saddle.

'Thank Heaven it *is*—which it would not have been

if your horse had been as great a fool as yourself,' was the sarcastic rejoinder. 'Are you out of your mind?'

'Yes, Sir; leastways, I have just seen enough to make me so. O Sir, Squire Blissett lies dead in Burslem Bottom.'

'Dead! How's that?'

'I do not know how, Sir; but so I found him, not ten minutes back. Good God, Sir, look at my knees!' He pointed with horror to the blood stains on his buckskin breeches where he had knelt by the side of the dead man. 'Three-quarters of a mile or so upon the left-hand side yonder he lies. I was galloping to Newnham to fetch help—or rather some wheeled conveyance to take his poor body home, for he is past all doctors' work.'

'You are quite sure of that?'

'Quite sure, Sir. His skull is broken in, and he lies as cold and stiff as a stone.'

'In that case, you had better ride on as you intended, while I go forward. I saw you at the meet this morning, did I not? You are Robert, Mr. Blissett's groom?' The old gentleman looked him through and through, then nodded encouragingly. 'Ride as fast as you please; there will be nobody of any consequence in your way *now*. Let your horse have his head, but keep your own; and if you see such a thing as a county magistrate about, bring him back with you.—O yes, I'll stay by your poor master, never fear.' With that the doctor urged his pony slowly down the pitch, while the groom hurried on.

'That's an honest fellow,' muttered the former. 'There's no blood on his hands—nothing wrong about

him except his wits. But that sort of fellow is so easily frightened; I dare say I shall find his master alive after all, poor soul.' Here the pony put his forefeet well together, and glissaded a dozen yards. 'How the deuce folks can gallop in weather like this, and expect *not* to crack their skulls, is a marvel to me. But Frank Blissett is as well provided as a man can be in that respect—he has got a precious thick one.

Dr. Fungus was not by any means a heartless man; but years of chartered cynicism had soured his tone. He had long given up practice as a surgeon, and devoted himself to antiquarian pursuits, which seemed to alienate him yearly more and more from living humanity; and yet he was fond of society in his Diogenes fashion—fond of the opportunity of being biting and philosophic. Although no sportsman—never known to ride so much as three fields after the hounds—yet he was to be seen at every meet, and, upon the whole, was welcome there, for he had the reputation of being 'a character,' which, in the country, has almost the same attraction which Genius has in town. His pony, his umbrella, his favourite and prevailing tint of blue, were unfailing subjects of jest among the members of the Hunt; and if their jokes were sometimes somewhat rough, he was allowed, in return, to bestow upon them the gall of his bitterness. They called him Toadstool, in delicate raillery of his name; but a better title for him, had they read their Shakspeares (which they had not), and not forgotten their Homers (which they had), would have been Thersites. It had been his intention to reach the Druid Ring that afternoon, for the purpose of measuring a certain monolith, about

which a fiery dispute was raging in the columns of an antiquarian journal ; but, to do him justice, he thought of nothing now but poor Squire Blissett. Fortunately, the fog was beginning to thin and lift ; the objects near at hand to become distinct, and those more distant to grow into being ; so that he saw the body plainly enough before he reached it, and was prepared for that swerve his pony gave (for even dumb animals shrink from the presence of Death), which would certainly otherwise have unseated so uncouth a rider. There was no occasion to retain his hold on *Dapple*, for the tying the blue umbrella to his rein was an understood signal to 'stand still.' Then the doctor approached the prostrate man, and knelt down by him as Robert had done, but taking care to avoid the thick red pool that lay about his head.

'Dead,' said he, shaking his gray head—'dead enough, poor fellow !' He took his right arm up, clad in its scarlet bravery, and felt it, and let it gently fall. 'He has not been a living man these four hours. What a frightful blow ! and yet the ground here is not so hard. Oh, I see—the stones !' There were two or three large flint-stones, with cruel angles, lying close by the corpse, and one of them was stained with blood. 'On the *back* of his head ! Now, I don't understand that !' The doctor drew *Dapple* as near to the body as the frightened beast could be prevailed to come, and mounted him ; his object was to picture to himself exactly how the thing could have happened. 'Holloa !' He was looking around him very carefully, and this exclamation was caused by something on the ground at a few paces from where he sat. It was the mark

of a human footstep. The doctor once more dismounted, and treading very carefully, so as not to destroy the impress, stooped down and examined it. The ground was comparatively soft, and even muddy there; the same footstep was repeated, with its fellow, once, twice, thrice—altogether seven footsteps, coming from the Allgrove direction towards Newnham. 'These could not have been the groom's, for he was coming the other way,' muttered the investigator. 'Good God! it is as I suspected—there has been some foul play.' The old man's blue spectacles were turned suspiciously all around, for it was clear now for a great distance. The landscape showed no sign of human life—none on the downland, of which the clouds of vapour, rolling upward, exposed vast spaces momentarily; none on the ploughed fields upon either side of the high-banked way. It was a wild and lonesome place, and now made doubly desolate by the presence of death; but the doctor felt in no way 'eerie.' If a British king had been slain there a couple of thousand years ago, then indeed the spot would have had an interest for him that would have closed his lips in reverence; if those blood-stained flints had formed the portion of a cairn, he would have looked upon them with feelings approaching awe; but he was a practical man in respect to all matters that had occurred within the last five hundred years. 'Whoever the scoundrel is, he has had four good hours to get away in; ay, and as *they fly*' (a pair of carrion crows, the only sign of life, were flapping slowly across the Bottom), 'there are two railway stations within five miles. But let us have the length of his foot, at all events.' With the tape that

he had brought with him to take the dimensions of the Druid Stone, he accurately measured the footstep; then, struck by a sudden thought, he applied the tape to the sole of the poor squire's top-boot. 'It is the mark of his own foot!' cried he in astonishment. 'What was he walking for? and if walking, how could he have come by his death?'

There was by this time a large moving object on the hill by Newnham Clump, which presently drew nearer, and resolved itself into a spring-cart with three men in it, and two horsemen by its side; the groom, and a stout middle-aged gentleman called Lane, a county magistrate, who had flung himself upon the dead man's horse, and anxiously hurried to the spot, for poor Blissett was his friend as well as his neighbour.

'Good God! what has happened, Fungus?' cried he, as he galloped up a little ahead of the rest.

'Death!' returned the doctor calmly; 'and what is worse than death—MURDER.'

'Murder!' cried the stout gentleman in a hoarse voice. 'Don't say that for Heaven's sake. Frank Blissett murdered! Impossible!'

'Hush! Make them keep back there—all of them. Let neither man nor horse come near awhile. See here, Sir.'

'I see. O Heaven, what a dreadful wound!'

'Call it a blow, Mr. Lane.'

'No—never. There is not a soul who would have harmed a hair of Frank Blissett's head in all the county, Sir.'

'Perhaps the villain belonged to another county, then,' answered the doctor curtly. 'You are a fox-

hunter, and ought to know these matters better than I. Could any man riding along this road have been pitched upon that stone on the back of his head—the *back*, look you? Answer me that.'

'I do not think he could,' said the other gravely—
'at least, I have never seen such a case.'

'Of course not. Now, look here, before those fellows come and tread them out. Here are footmarks—his own footmarks, for I have measured them—he was walking, you see, and not riding; therefore, the thing is still more incredible, and could not possibly have happened by accident.'

'Yes, it could,' said Mr. Lane, after some consideration. 'I see it all now quite plainly. Poor Blissett had been walking along the Bottom, on account of the hardness of the ruts, until he found the road was getting better; then—just here—he grasped the reins, and was about to mount, when something, God knows what, alarmed his horse, and he fell backward on this pointed stone. A tall heavy man like him—— Of course it would be his death-blow.'

'A sportsman does not let go of his rein so easily, Mr. Lane,' said the doctor, shaking his head.

'Look here, Fungus,' whispered the other eagerly, taking the old man aside. 'For God's sake, don't pursue this discussion. You are an obstinate man, I know, but you are not a heartless one. What does it matter, now our poor friend is gone, whether he fell from foot or horseback? To suppose him murdered, is to suppose a crime not only monstrous and incredible, but without an object. His watch, his money, are untouched; and I will stake my life the

poor fellow had not an enemy in the world. On the other hand, by even mooted the idea of foul play either here or at the Inquest, you will embitter tenfold the misery of his wife and child. Mrs. Blissett, poor creature, is in the most delicate health. I doubt whether this blow, even as it is, will not destroy her. Now, for her sake, Fungus, do be ruled by me.'

'It is no wish of mine, Mr. Lane,' returned the doctor calmly, 'to make any stir about the matter. I have withdrawn from the profession, and have no reputation to lose in that way; but if this dead man had been my friend, I should think it my first duty to see justice done upon his murderer.'

'He *was* my friend, Dr. Fungus, and that is why I adjure you to keep this strange idea of yours to yourself.'

'Very well; so be it. Only, if the coroner asks me at the Inquest——'

'Yes; but he will not ask you,' interrupted the magistrate. 'I am sure such an idea will never enter his head.'

'I dare say not, for no idea ever does,' replied the doctor bluntly. 'They had better place the body in the cart there.'

'You will accompany us to Allgrove?' rejoined Mr. Lane with hesitation.

'No, Sir; certainly not. I go where I am wanted—not elsewhere. It is only the parson who can be what is called "of use" now—though, for my part, I rather doubt even *his* usefulness.'

'I am aware that you are a Freethinker, Sir,' observed the magistrate hotly. 'My poor friend here

was a simple Christian man; and, forgive me, this sort of talk is peculiarly unwelcome to my ears just now.'

'Very well, then, I'll rid you of it;' and the doctor having, with the utmost deliberation, mounted *Dapple*, trotted away without a word or gesture of farewell as the mournful procession began to move more slowly in the same direction.

'What a shallow, backboneless set they are!' muttered Diogenes with supreme contempt. 'How resolute to think as they wish; how anxious to make things smooth at any cost, are these fine, outspoken, honest country gentlemen! Bah! as for truth, they have not one halfpenny-worth of the genuine article among them. Their justice is sentiment, their religion is bigotry. How right they were to make that man yonder the chairman of their quarter-sessions!'

Mr. Lane's round face was as scarlet as the dead man's coat, as he led the way towards the downs. He was well convinced that the idea of murder was a mere chimera of the doctor's brain; one of those ridiculous crotchets of which little Toadstool was as full as an egg was full of meat. The idea of his venturing to call in question the sincerity of his friendship for poor Blissett! *He*, indeed, who never had a friend, and never would have: the disbelieving, withered anatomy! It was just as likely as not that he might still make himself disagreeable at the inquest, and shock the feelings not only of the poor widow, but of all the best families in the county. The idea of a country gentleman being murdered in broad day, or nearly so, in Breakneckshire! Did he mistake the

place for Tipperary? Idiot! and a very mischievous idiot too.—‘What is it, Robert?’

‘If you please, Sir,’ said the groom, who had ridden forward, and was touching his hat respectfully, ‘I want to have one word with you, Mr. Lane.’

‘By all means. Say on.’

‘Well, Sir, with regard to my poor master yonder,’ with a glance of genuine distress over his shoulder, ‘I forgot to say—and, indeed, nobody has asked me—that I moved his poor body round. He was lying on his face at first, Sir, when I found him.’

‘Ay, poor fellow! He must have turned over, then, just once.’

‘Yes, Sir; I suppose that must have been it.’

‘Of course it was. But, look you, Robert, if you forget it once, you may forget it again. There is no sort of importance to be attached to the circumstance; but the fact is, Dr. Fungus has got it into his head that your good, kind master did not come to his end altogether by fair means.’

‘Why, God bless him, Sir! who’d ha’ hurt him?’

‘Ay, who, indeed? Well, it is not my duty to suppress evidence, you know—quite the reverse; but it is just as well not to encourage such a foolish notion as this of the doctor’s, if only for your mistress’s sake. She will be made wretched enough by *this*, poor soul. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Sir; and very much obliged to you for the hint.’

Robert dropped back, and the chairman of quarter-sessions rode on alone.

‘That’s curious, though,’ reflected he, ‘his turning

round after such a wound as that ; muscular action, I suppose, or something of that sort. However, I am quite sure I am doing right in saving this poor lady's feelings. What a task I've got before me ! Well, we must do our duty in this world, whether it's pleasant or not. His turning himself round after such a wound as that was certainly very curious.'





CHAPTER V.

AT THE NIGHT REFUGE.

IT is the close of that same day in which Frank Blissett came to his end in Burslem Bottom ; but the scene shifts to town. The fog hangs thickly, and mixing with the moonless night, makes ghostly darkness. What light there is from the few still open shop-fronts (for it is getting late), and from the gas-lamps, makes but a feeble shine, and even that is untrustworthy. Objects loom larger than they are, and yet so vaguely, that one can scarcely tell when one is clear of passing vehicles. Foot-passengers delay at the crossings, fearing to intrust themselves to the dim void that roars between them and the other side, for it is not so dark as to produce link-boys. Nervous folk spend many minutes in indecision, then rush across at headlong speed ; or charter the crossing sweeper, who bears a charmed life, as their convoy.

‘Take you over, Sir—take you safe over for a penny,’ is the reasonable offer made by one of this class to a tall man, who has for some time been hesitating to

commit himself to the passage of a great thoroughfare in the neighbourhood of Oxford Street. 'Take you over for a penny, and bring you back again for the same money,' continued the professional insinuatingly.

'How the devil would you know me again?' inquired the other with a contemptuous laugh.

'Easily, Sir. Know you among a thousand, by night or day, and in any clothes you chose to wear. You aint one of the common sort, not you.'

Instead of being pleased by the compliment this speech implied, the individual addressed gave a short sharp glance at the speaker, as though suspicious of something beyond what was expressed, then answered with a sneer: 'If lies were a shilling a dozen, I would give you a penny;' then quickly stepped into the street, and made his way to the other side.

'Nice, agreeable, pleasant-mannered gent *that* is,' soliloquised the sweeper. 'He as can see Tottenham Court Road and the Quadrant at the same moment of time don't want nobody to take care of him over street-crossings.' This remark, though rather of a personal nature, was so far warranted that it was founded on fact. The gentleman had a decided squint. The defect was not very prominent, but he had been standing immediately under the gas-lamp for some minutes, and the other, with the unfailing observation of his class, had taken stock of him. Even with the same opportunity, however, he might not have noticed this squint at another time. It was intermittent, and became obtrusive only when its proprietor was mentally agitated, as he was to-night. It was no wonder that the sweeper had mistaken

him for one of his nervous passengers. Without, as appeared by his delay, this gentleman's having the least cause for haste, his movements were impatient and incessant. Now he glanced on this side, now on that, and now over his shoulder behind him. A footstep heavier than common would seem occasionally to attract his attention; his attitude became that of an anxious listener; and as the steps grew nearer, he would huddle his cloak about his ears until only his piercing eyes were visible, shooting crosswise at the expected face. But if he was looking for any particular individual, his search was fruitless. He seemed to expect it would be so, for as the man passed by (and it was always a man), he would smile to himself contemptuously, and draw a long breath, as if of relief. And yet, if he was afraid of being recognised, it was strange that he should stand so long, in so thronged a spot, and exposed to a glare of light, on a night when privacy and gloom were so easily attainable.

Now that he is once more in motion, he passes swiftly along vacant spaces, and walks more slowly where there are knots of passengers, accommodating his pace, so far as he can do so without exciting observation, to theirs. It would seem as if this gentleman had an unconquerable aversion to being left alone. Having left the main thoroughfare, and plunged into a net of little by-streets, companionship is more difficult to obtain, and the stranger so quickens his pace that he soon reaches the object of his destination. This is a plain unpretentious building, but contrasting greatly with the other houses in the same street in

point of size. It would make ten of any one of those mean and slatternly tenements. As no gentleman's house can be situated in such a neighbourhood, it must be some public building, and, indeed, if the fog were not so dense, you might read over its wide double doors the word 'Refuge.' It is not, however, like the casual wards for the houseless poor, or those Refuges for the Destitute which are now happily to be found in almost every quarter of the town, but one of those rarer institutions which receive 'selected cases' from the workhouses and elsewhere, and afford relief of a somewhat less transient character—food and lodging until the inmates can obtain work—and offer a temporary home. The stranger seizes the bell-handle, and pulls it in a manner which doubtless suggests drunkenness and insubordination, and an applicant altogether unfit for so comparatively genteel an institution, for the porter only opens the door a very little way, and inquires in unconciliatory tones: 'Well, Mr. Impatience, and what's *your* business?'

'The representation of Nature; the depicting of human passion under its grandest——'

'I'll have the police to you, my man, in a brace of shakes,' interrupted the official. 'We don't want none of you drunken ranting fellows here, nor none of your sauce.'

'Not if they give you half a guinea for your trouble?' inquired the stranger coldly. It was curious how cynical and self-contained his manner grew directly he was brought into communication with others, notwithstanding his hurried and nervous demeanour when alone.

'Why, bless my soul!' cried the porter, throwing

the door wide open, 'to think of my not knowing your voice! As for your face, I didn't catch sight of it, else it aint one one's likely to forget; but you don't look so well, Sir, as when you were here last.'

'I'm not very well, Curtis, thank you. I was not well last night, and, indeed, I have not been out of bed many hours. Have you got anything likely to suit me in the house just now?'

'Well, Sir, I really can't say,' answered the other laughing, as he fastened the door, and ushered his visitor into an apartment half parlour, half office. 'You take a fancy to such queer folks. I hope that old man with the white beard, as you were good enough to take off our hands in the summer, behaved better with you than he did with us?'

'You did not understand his treatment, Curtis. You endeavoured to wash him, which was contrary to his nature, and therefore a cruelty. He did very well indeed, and I believe will make quite a hit in the spring. The ladies will all be enraptured with his venerable appearance.'

'Dear, dear, what a strange trade!' exclaimed the porter admiringly. 'As for the old gent hisself, now, I dare say you don't know what's become of him by this time?'

'Indeed, I don't; and I may add, Curtis, that I don't care—no, not three skips of that insect with which I'm afraid our ancient friend was not wholly unacquainted.'

'Ay, he had seen better days in his time, though, Sir. Our chaplain said the old fellow's story was a very sad one.'

‘It was a very long one, at all events, and bored me dreadfully to listen to it; but it had this advantage, that it made the old fellow weep, and I wanted him to do that for the purposes of my art. You can never get the tender emotions naturally enough evoked by onions.—Well, let’s go round the wards.’

Now the stranger is in a well-lighted room, and has taken his hat off, we can better see what he is like. As to years, he has scarcely reached middle age, but his features have the worn and furrowed look of a much more advanced period of life. He is not bald, but is in that transition stage which is less agreeable than baldness, when the scanty locks are purposely worn long, and carefully combed across the head. His complexion is peculiar; he has been in India, but it has not the tinge of the Indian climate; if you had heard he had been manager of a coffee-plantation (which, for a short time, he was), you might have said (if you were a person who spoke on impulse rather than reflection): ‘*That’s* it.’ He was coffee-coloured; but his features were regular, and their expression exceedingly intelligent. If you saw him, as we see him now, with his eyes no longer crosswise, you would not think him a plain man, and certainly not a commonplace one; but still he is not an attractive person. The impression he conveys is a bad one; he is so cold, reserved, and cynical in air and manner, that he seems malign. The ward into which he is first ushered is the female one; well lit, and intensely clean, but except for its large fire, without the least trace of comfort. No easy-chair is to be seen, no book, no knick-knack, no picture on the wall; no

little table, but one huge one, at which a dozen or so of women sit, plying their needles, but not their tongues. An unnatural silence pervades the place, save for the crowing of a child. One woman has an infant in her lap, who, all unconscious that he is born of shame and predestined to poverty, kicks and prattles exactly as a young prince of the same age would do.

'Rise !' cries the porter (who is also the deputy-master of the establishment) in an authoritative voice ; and all stand up, not 'spring to their feet,' nor even obey the word of command as soldiers do, mechanically, but one after another slowly rise like ghosts, till they stand looking at the stranger with uninterested, lack-lustre eyes. The baby screams lustily, resenting his change of posture, and the mother clasps him to her face, and covers him with silent kisses. Upon these two, the visitor's gaze rests, passing by the others with careless unconcern.

'There's a hinteresting couple, eh, Sir,' whispers Curtis, grinning. 'They'd make a pretty pictur.'

'Yes, a Magdalen and Child,' replied the painter, for such of course he was ; 'but the subject, like the lady, is somewhat common.—Well, Mrs. Paul, how do *you* do ?'

This last remark was addressed to the matron, whose presence, in his admiration of maternal instinct, he had hitherto failed to notice ; she was stout and florid, presenting in that respect a singular contrast to the pale faces and pinched features of those around her, and her voice was deep and mellow.

'Nicely, Sir, I thank you. We have not seen you here for many a day.'

‘Well, I have not been doing much work, Mrs. Paul, and therefore have not been in want of the raw material. I dare say you have missed me a good deal. I know you look to me to take away your dead-weights, your goods that hang most on hand. I am none of your benevolent folks, your mercy-mongers, I allow : and yet I am the greatest benefactor you have ; come now, confess it.’

‘Well, Sir, we’ve all our uses,’ replied the matron bluntly. ‘I don’t gainsay but that it is a good thing for our poor folks to take your fancy, and get paid for sitting still, and having their pictures took ; but I don’t look upon you, Sir, as I do upon a subscriber to the hinstitution, one as gives his money, and expects no return for it—that I tell you fairly.’

‘And I am very much obliged to you, my dear good lady,’ answered the painter smiling, but with a momentary squint that marked his anger, ‘for not counting me among the fools.—Is there nobody under your charge just now, except the present company?’

‘There’s no one else, Sir, but a poor girl whom I have given leave to sit in the dormitory alone, because she’s not in good spirits.’

‘Let’s see her, by all means, Mrs. Paul. I am very anxious to make the acquaintance of any young person who sits alone in a dormitory sixty feet long as a cure for despondency.’

‘I don’t think, Sir, she can possibly have any interest for you,’ answered the stout lady, hesitating and turning a deeper tinge of crimson. ‘She’s wretched, ill, and not at all good-looking.’

‘My dear, good lady,’ responded the visitor, showing

all his teeth, so frank and open was his smile, but squinting like a stage demon, 'if good health, happiness, and beauty were what I came hither to seek for, I should long ago have run away with *you*.'

'Ah, you're a false one, you are, I'm afraid, Sir,' said the matron, wagging her head to express more than doubt, and leading the way up some stairs that wound directly from the apartment to the room above. This latter was, as the stranger had hinted, of great size; and feebly illuminated as it was by a single gas-lamp, only half turned on, its dimensions appeared limitless. Some half-dozen of the narrow iron beds that ran from end to end of it alone were visible, with the black white-washed wall behind them. Crouched, nose and knees together, by the high iron fender—or rather cage, for it had a covered top—which hedged in the fire, was a female form. Not a limb moved as the visitors approached: but when the matron touched her with her hand, and not ungently said, 'Are you better now, my girl?' the down-bent head raised up its wealth of nut-brown hair, and disclosed a sharp thin face, with hollow eyes.

'What is it, mistress?'

To judge by the tone of the inquiry, it mattered nothing what the reply might be: there was such an utter hopelessness in the voice, such numbness to all weal or woe.

'Are you better?' reiterated the woman.

'No; and never shall be.—What are these? Doctors?' She gave one wearied look at the two men, then turned her eyes to the fire, already lost in her sad thoughts.

'*Very* interesting,' observed the painter coolly. 'Much the most striking object in your establishment, Ma'am. Apathy—a Study from Life; or, if one had a genius for depicting eccentricities, *The Female Caspar Hauser*.'

'It is near supper-time, my dear,' said the matron good-humouredly. 'Don't you think you could pick a bit of something?'

'Slice of wild duck, back of woodcock, Mrs. Paul, eh?' whispered the visitor.

'No, Sir; we have none of those delicacies, answered the stout lady curtly; 'but we have one good thing in the house which I don't think would be found in *your* larder, though you are such a clever gentleman: we have some sympathy for the poor.'

'Cold sympathy on the sideboard, eh?' observed the other quietly; 'always in cut for all comers: cold sympathy in the wood constantly on draught, eh? And yet I suppose the stipend of such an invaluable matron is not seventy pounds a year. If they made it guineas, the committee might secure an angel.'

'I don't mind what you say to *me*, Sir—no, not two straws,' retorted the matron. 'But I don't wish to hear poor folks insulted. You may be a poor man yourself, Sir, one day, and then——'

'You dear, impulsive soul,' interrupted the stranger, raising his delicate white hands, and pretending to make mesmeric passes at her; 'be calm. Poor? Why, I am poorer than any creature under your roof. With the exception of this half-crown, of which I am presently going to beg your acceptance, and of a little

matter which I've got for Curtis, I have not a shilling in the world, and I owe exactly fifty thousand of them.'

'Then you had better be just before you're generous, and keep what you have to pay your bills,' answered the matron with honest heat; 'but there, gentlemen of your sort don't spend their money that way. You may give my share of your bounty to this poor girl here, if you please.'

'And yours also, Curtis?' inquired the visitor gravely.

'Well, no, Sir,' returned the porter hastily. 'You see I have not the opportunity of knowing whether this young person is a deserving object, which Mrs. Paul enjoys. You may give her *her* half-crown, of course, because she offers it.'

'He talks like King James's bishop,' muttered the painter.—'Here, young woman, is some money for you; one of the best remedies for your particular ailment with which I am acquainted.'

But the head had once more sunk down upon the breast, and the hands were clasping the thin knees; and Mrs. Paul had to touch her for the second time to rouse her.

'This gentleman offers you half-a-crown; will you not take it? Come, hold out your hand, my lass. You'll be glad of it some day, if not now.'

'Too late, too late!' murmured the girl, and she began to moan and rock herself from side to side in a manner piteous to behold.

'She's in great trouble, you see, Sir,' said the matron compassionately. 'I don't think it's any use to speak

to her. It's my belief she has lost her baby—perhaps starved to death, who knows?'

'Ay, and she has not had time to take a philosophical view of the matter,' observed the visitor, as the three moved away, leaving the figure crouching as they found it, and throwing its shapeless shadow on the wall. 'In a week or two, she will learn to feel that she is rid of an encumbrance; and that it is all for the best.—Good-evening, Mrs. Paul; I am much obliged.'

'Good-evening, Sir.—And if ever there was a cold-hearted, slimy serpent in this world,' was the matron's after-reflection, it's you, Sir. If *your* mother had been rid of *her* encumbrance, it's my belief that the world would have found *that* for the best. The idea of his putting that half-a-crown back into his pocket, and not leaving it for the poor girl when she came to herself and to know the value of money! Bah! if that's a gentleman, give me common people.'

Totally undisturbed by the knowledge that he had left an ill-wisher behind him, the visitor followed his guide into the male ward, separated from that which we have seen by a long stone passage.

'Don't you say "Rise!" Curtis, as you did just now,' said he imperatively. 'I want to see these fellows as they ordinarily look; not standing up as awkwardly as scarecrows in a field, to receive visitors.'

'Very good, Sir. Then the only way to catch 'em so is not to go in just yet, but to watch 'em through the spy-hole. I can't be always with 'em, you see, as Mrs. Paul can with her people; but they never knows

whether I am with 'em or not, and that has a very good effect.'

Making a gesture of silence, he slid aside an upper panel in the door before him, and motioned to his companion to look in.

The apartment was the fac-simile of that occupied by the females, but a low under-current of conversation proclaimed the absence of official restraint. Several tracts, and a few periodicals of a very sober, not to say dull description, were littered upon the great deal table; but of the twenty men and lads that occupied the room, not half a dozen were reading. Some were conversing in a low tone to their next neighbours; some were asleep, with their heads resting on their hands; but the majority were doing absolutely nothing, and a very wretched employment they seemed to find it. Poverty without hope, pain without the power of endurance, broken health and broken means—these were mirrored on all sides; but a breaking heart, at least as we are accustomed to conceive it, nowhere. There were no tears; nor had there been any even in the women's ward. Before folks drift into Refuges for the Destitute, their tears, if they have such to shed, have commonly all fallen; the fountain of them is dried up, or has been trodden out by the feet of the cruel. Or, if not so, there being no privacy, the luxury of grief cannot be indulged in such establishments, where there are always a sufficient supply of absolute scoundrels, whose vices, not misfortunes, have brought them thither, and whose last remaining pleasure is to gibe at the woes of others more wretched than themselves. The men are mostly much more

advanced in years than their sisters in misfortune, though their gray heads shake with feebleness rather than extreme old age; or is it that that outward sign of the lack of hope has become chronic with them? But there are a few of middle age, ill-complexioned, sottish fellows, whose lips are parching for a dram, and who have no thought for the wives and daughters whom their selfishness has reduced from some respectable station (or they would not be here) to this sad and shameful pass. One of these, who is perusing a tract with a sardonic smile, has a singularly intelligent look. 'One of the cleverest fellows in England, Sir,' whispered Curtis, seeing his companion's glance directed to this man. 'He beats our chaplain, and *he* is considered a very learned man, into fits at argyment; and they do say has been a parson once hisself.'

'But has seen the error of his ways, eh? Well, what is he now?'

'Well, I believe he is a political lecturer. At all events, he has the gift of the gab, I do assure you, Sir. You should hear him talk—they *may* talk, you know, between twelve and two—agen the bench of bishops. That was his wife, the party with the bunged-up eye, as you saw in the next room. Some people complains of our separation of married folks here, but, lor, it's a blessing to *her*.'

'Who is that lad sitting by the fire, Curtis?' inquired the painter abstractedly. 'To judge by his face, he ought to have thrice the wits of your statesman there, even before he began to sodden them with gin and water.'

'O, that's quite the gentleman, that is,' said Curtis with a sneer. 'He's much too high to be allowed to stay with us; else I think I could have taken him down a peg or two. He refused to call me "Sir" the first night he came, the impudent young rascal!' "

'You don't mean to say that!'

 returned the other with mock-gravity. 'Nothing is so reprehensible in youth as not to recognise its superiors.'

'Just so, Sir,' assented the unconscious deputy-master; 'and yet our chaplain took to him wonderful; though, for my part, I see nothing in him. Why, he came here, Sir, in downright rags, just as you see him; but he's much too good for us, it seems, and the parson is going to make him a teacher at the school he is going to set up down the lane.'

'Then our young friend's a scholar, is he?'

'O dear, yes,' answered the other with asperity, 'except that he has not learned manners, which I should like to teach him with my wax-ended cane. Did you ever see such a spirited-looking young vagabone? O, but he shall have his milk and water so as it shan't hurt his nerves to-night, I'll promise him!'

Without any air of audacity, such as might reasonably have aroused the deputy-master's ire, the lad in question did not certainly wear the broken, spiritless look so characteristic of the other inmates of the Refuge. His clothes, which, however, had been evidently at one time those of a young gentleman, were shabby and torn; his boots—for he was sitting alone by the fire, and could be seen from top to toe—had burst in several places; and so

far, he was on as low a step of the social ladder as anyone in the room—a penniless vagrant, without doubt, and most probably a beggar. But, unlike the stunted or feeble forms about him, his limbs were shapely and well grown, exhibiting no sign of protracted want and hardship; and his face, though pale and worn, would have redeemed any costume—and a more pitiful one than his own it was hard to imagine. His age was about seventeen; but although his hair was almost jet black, no sign of whisker was visible on his olive cheeks (for he was very dark), nor trace of down upon his upper lip. His hands were small, and delicately shaped, and his hazel eyes very bright and intelligent, even when deep in thought, as he was now.

‘The parson has not taken a fancy to him because he’s a lady in disguise, has he?’ observed the painter cynically.

‘He a lady! If you’d ever seen him strike out from the shoulder, and felt his knuckles——’

‘O, *you have*, have you?’ observed the other as Curtis hesitated. ‘There has been some little altercation between you and this young gentleman and scholar, eh? Well, that makes you a prejudiced person, Mr. Curtis. I should like to have a few words with this dangerous character myself.’

Thus saying, and before the deputy-master could even slide back the panel, the painter opened the door, and stood within the room. The buzz of conversation ceased at once; the political lecturer substituted for his expressions of contempt one of intense interest in the theological work he was perusing; one

or two old men—*habitués* of the establishment, or others similar to it—rose unbidden to their feet, and pulled their gray and scanty forelocks; everybody became respectful, if not contented; quiet, if not resigned—everybody, that is, except the lad by the fire.

‘Eaves-dropper!’ observed he, pointing significantly to the empty panel, and regarding the deputy-master with a look of extreme contempt. ‘If I had known you were there, you would have heard my opinion of you, you Jack-in-office.’

‘Speak when you’re spoken to, young Imperence, will you, and not before. A week’s bread and water, with a rope’s end twice a day, would do you a deal of good. Don’t you see that the gentleman wishes to speak to you? Stand up!’

Without replying a syllable to this harangue, except by a quiet smile, the young man rose from his seat, as though politely acknowledging the presence of a stranger, rather than obeying a command.

‘So you are going to be a schoolmaster, I understand,’ observed the painter encouragingly.

‘The chaplain here has been so good as to promise me such a place,’ returned the lad with courtesy, rather than deference.

‘Why don’t you say *Sir*?’ inquired the deputy-master savagely. ‘Don’t you know when a gentleman is speaking to you, you ill-mannered dog?’

‘Yes, indeed; there is a great difference,’ answered the lad smiling, and looking gratefully at the painter.

‘You had better be quiet, my good Curtis,’ said the latter, ‘and not interrupt us. This dog bites.—Surely,

my young friend, the plodding task of schoolmaster is scarcely likely to suit such a one as you—the teaching ragged boys to touch their hats to folks in broadcloth is not in *your* line, eh ? ’

‘Alas, Sir, beggars,’ and the lad touched his rags with a sad smile, ‘must not be choosers. The good clergyman was very kind.’

‘Just so ; but still, if you had any better offer, you would not hesitate to take it. The fact is, I am a painter, and I came here for a study—a model—for a particular picture. You will suit me, I think. The work, if such it can be called, is light enough, and the pay good—much better than a ragged-school teacher’s. You have this great advantage in my eyes over those who might suit me as well in other respects : you have a story to tell, and will be able to narrate it so as to interest me. I cannot paint from stocks and stones. Do you understand?’

‘I think I do, Sir. But when the story is told, and the picture is painted?’

‘You have a shrewd eye to the future, young man ; and you are right. Well, even afterwards, I shall find something for you to do. You will mix my colours ; you may be my amanuensis ; you will have to arrange my library’ (the painter suddenly turned deadly white) ; ‘yes, my few books will be under your care. I am not a rich man—very far from it ; but I can make it worth your while.’

‘Come, Sir,’ interposed Curtis sullenly, much displeased that the painter should be holding so long and apparently so friendly a parley with his mortal foe ; ‘it is just upon closing-time. I am sorry we

have nothing to suit you ; better luck next time. Sit down, you boy, to table : here's your supper, and mind you're thankful for it.'

A man had entered, bearing a quantity of tin mugs, and a basketful of hunches of bread.

'Stop a little, Curtis,' said the painter ; 'I will make it worth your while to do so.'

'When I've fetched the milk and water, you must go, Sir,' returned the deputy-master ; 'that's our rule, *even with subscribers*. Our meals here aint a beast show.'

'That fellow likes you so ill, that he even quarrels with me for speaking to you,' observed the painter significantly. 'You will have his insolence to endure for days, perhaps weeks, before you get this appointment you speak of.'

'And when could I get yours, Sir?'

'Immediately. There is a spare room at my lodgings ; and I can certainly give you a better supper than this will be. You can enter upon your duties to-morrow morning. Will you come with me now, at once?'

'What ! in these rags, Sir?'

'Pooh ! what of that ? In my eyes, poverty is not disgraceful, but only picturesque ; besides, it is as dark as the devil to-night, and nobody will see you. To-morrow, you shall be rigged out in one of my old suits : we are about of a size, I think.'

'You are very good, Sir,' said the young man gratefully ; 'but I don't like to leave this place without a word of thanks to the chaplain. Perhaps to-morrow——'

‘No ; now, or not at all,’ urged the painter imperatively ; and his eyes for the first time glanced askew. ‘You must choose between the chaplain and myself at once, young Sir.’

It was curious to watch the expressive play of the lad’s features ; the combat of a strong will with one yet stronger ; determination to refuse, yet regret at having to do so ; hesitation between two courses—the one more dutiful, the other more attractive.

‘Now, young shaver, here’s your sky-blue, and mind it don’t get into your head,’ ejaculated the deputy-master with a wink addressed to the general public ; and a servile laugh broke forth from the abjects round the table.

‘I accept your offer, Sir,’ exclaimed the young man eagerly. ‘I will leave this place to-night ; at once, if you please. My name is Charles Steen. Let me know, I pray you, to whom I am indebted for rescue from such a den?’

The painter, with a smile of triumph, drew forth his card-case, and handed to the lad his name and address. ‘MR. FREDERICK BLISSETT, Clifford Street, Bond Street,’ were the words printed on the card.



CHAPTER VI.

CLIFFORD STREET.

MR. CURTIS, deputy-master and porter of Slop Street Refuge, was far from pleased to hear that he was to be rid of his young foe that night. At present, the sense of obligation lay heavily upon his mind; he owed the lad something of the sort which we are all so much more ready to pay than our debts—a grudge, an injury, a tit for tat; he had laid his wand of office (which he had no authority to do) about the poor boy's shoulders, in return for some real or fancied mark of disrespect, and the consequences had been most unexpected and disastrous. The worm had turned—this wretched pauper, this recent contribution from the union work-house had knocked him down. The insubordination could not be lawfully punished, because it had arisen from his own illegal act, but it was being gradually worked out in small annoyances and petty insults, so many of which were still due. And yet he could not prevent the lad's departure. By the rules of the Refuge, any inmate might leave it between the hours of

6 A.M. and 10 P.M. ; and it was not ten yet. Moreover, Mr. Curtis did not wish to offend the painter, whose hand might so soon be expected to seek his waistcoat-pocket.

'I don't think I ought to pay you anything, Curtis,' said Mr. Blissett doubtfully, 'since I am relieving you of the presence of so insubordinate and formidable a person ; but there is the half-crown which your hard heart would not let me bestow upon that poor girl.'

Purple with indignation, either at the smallness of the gift, or the greatness of the affront, the deputy-master pocketed both in silence, and opening the front-door scarcely wide enough for the two to pass, slammed it violently behind them. 'I never knew any good come to one of our people through that gentleman-painter's taking him in hand,' muttered he viciously ; that's *some* comfort : the audacious young villain !'

'Keep by my side, Steen,' ejaculated Mr. Blissett hastily, 'or else we may lose one another in this cursed fog : keep close, quite close.'

But the boy in rags, disinclined, for his patron's sake, to keep such close companionship, and perceiving him to be immersed in thought, dropped a little behind, albeit he could still have touched him by reaching out his arm ; and so they went along at a rapid rate through the dim streets, like a man and his shadow.

'Thousand devils ! what do you want with me ?' exclaimed the painter suddenly, his face turning a pale green, and trembling violently, as it seemed, with in-

tense passion. 'How dare you lay your hand upon my shoulder?'

A policeman had stopped him, and was throwing the light of his bull's-eye full upon the ill-matched pair.

'I stop you because it is my duty, Sir,' returned the officer with that cool, grave tone and impassive manner characteristic of the force. 'I wish to warn you that you are followed by a ragged fellow, who is after no good.'

'It is all right; I know him,' gasped the painter; 'but here is a shilling to reward your vigilance all the same.'

Mr. Blissett pulled out the coin with shaking fingers, then strove to walk on as before; but the sudden shock seemed strangely to have affected his nerves. 'I am not well, Steen,' explained he; 'I have been indisposed for some time, and was not out of bed this morning until very late.' He spoke of his illness in a strange, mechanical way, just as he had spoken of it to the porter. 'Be so good as to call a cab. No, don't leave me: when you see one pass, you can hail it.'

After waiting no little time, a four-wheel at last passed by. The driver opened the door, and Mr. Blissett was about to step in, when he suddenly started back, asking: 'What was that? That — there's a man lying at the bottom of the cab.'

'Lor bless yer, Sir, it's only my mate's greatcoat! I was taking it home for him from the jobber's, and it has fell off the seat;' which, indeed, it had, sprawling out its sleeves and collar in rather a disconcerting

manner. 'But if you object, why, I'll put it outside.' Mr. Blissett does object; so the driver makes a parcel of the article, and packs it carefully away under the driving-seat, and thereby elevates himself to an unnatural height.

'Why the devil doesn't he drive on?' inquires the fare. 'He knows where he ought to go to, don't he?'

Whereupon they start, with more than the usual shock and clatter; while the driver mutters, that where he *ought* to go to, with that 'ere gent inside, is to the hospital for them as have the delirium trimmings. But, nevertheless, he drives to Clifford Street. By the time they arrive, Mr. Blissett's nerves have, it seems, recovered themselves. He neither knocks nor rings; but admitting himself and companion by a latch-key, leads the way into his dining-room, which is on the hall floor; two bed-rooms, with a bath-room, and his studio beyond it, and at the back of all, form his suite of bachelor apartments; and if an Englishman's house is his castle, Mr. Blissett's lodgings are, in the matter of seclusion, even more worthy of that title. Mrs. Maude, the landlady, and her two abigails have the strictest orders never to enter them, unless they are rung for, or are perfectly certain that he has left the house. He is never 'called' in the morning, for his habits are erratic; and for all they know, he may not have returned home till daylight and may wish to sleep into the afternoon.

'Steen,' said he, 'that is your bed-room: you will find everything you want there, I believe—such as linen, and so on—and put on this dressing-gown and

slippers, so that my people here may not be horror-struck by your costume, when they bring us supper. In the morning, you may take out of the wardrobe any suit you please.'

Left to himself, Mr. Blissett turned the gas full on, and examined himself carefully in the looking-glass. It was a very white and haggard face that appeared there; and though he placed his hand upon his heart, it could scarcely have been that, like Narcissus, he had fallen in love with himself. Then he rang the bell. A widow lady, soberly but handsomely dressed, respectful in manner, but very self-possessed, looking like a housekeeper in a nobleman's family, as indeed she once had been, presented herself.

'Good-morning and good-evening in one, Mrs. Maude,' said he.

'I hope you feel yourself better, Sir,' returned she, 'for your long night? But you look pale, Sir, still.'

'Well, the fact is, I had scarcely any sleep, Mrs. Maude, though I did seem to be such a sluggard. I don't think I ever took so much horizontal refreshment before. Let me see, you brought me my tea and that doctor's stuff at eight o'clock—did you not? Well, I went to bed almost directly; and what time did get up?'

'Well, Sir, you had not finished breakfast till one o'clock.'

'No, no, Mrs. Maude; I was not quite so bad as that. I left the house at 12.45, for I heard the church clock chime the quarters. Well, I hope to be less domestic in future.—Did anybody call, by-the-bye, last night, for I forgot to ask?'

'Nobody last night, Sir; but Mr. Ashden called this morning——'

'Well, go on.'

'Dear me, Sir, what a colour you are! I am sure you are not well yet.'

'Never mind me. Tell me about this Ashden. The fact is, Mrs. Maude—I don't mind telling you, who are an old friend—that that man's business worries me. You told him that I was ill of course, in bed, and not to be disturbed?'

'Yes, Sir; but——'

'But what? You don't mean to say you let him in?'

'No, indeed, Sir. And for that matter, if he had got in, you would have seen him, you may be sure, for he was very determined. Indeed, he said that he did not believe that you were ill at all, and that it was all—asking your pardon, Sir, for using so vulgar an expression—gammon.'

'The scoundrel!' ejaculated the painter; but not ill-humouredly either. 'When a man is a creditor, Mrs. Maude, he thinks he may say anything.'

'He said he would call again to-morrow morning, Sir, at ten o'clock; and if you were not up then, would wait till you were.'

'Very good, Mrs. Maude. Then you must give us one of your nice dishes for breakfast, as a sop for this Cerberus; one of those savory omelets, such as you alone can serve up, would melt the most obdurate of men. And, by-the-bye, send me in a little supper, please, to-night—any cold meat you have in the house will do—for *two*.'

‘For two, Sir?’

The genteel conciliation that was the stereotyped expression of Mrs. Maude when speaking to her lodgers on any subject except arrears of rent, suddenly vanished.

‘I have not eloped with a young heiress, and brought her home for the honeymoon, Mrs. Maude, if that is what you are afraid of,’ said the painter smiling. ‘It’s only——’

He was going to add: ‘A poor lad who may be useful to me as a model,’ when the individual in question entered the room. His ragged boots exchanged for his host’s slippers, his battered garments concealed by a gorgeous dressing-gown, this waif from the Refuge looked as handsome and delicate a young gentleman as ever captivated landlady. Mrs. Maude, not insensible to masculine beauty, and devoted to aristocratic appearance, folded her fat hands, and courtesied.

Mr. Blissett, in spite of himself, felt compelled to change his form of introduction. ‘It’s only a young gentleman,’ said he, ‘who is going to assist me in the studio and other ways—Mr. Charles Steen, Mrs. Maude.’

The landlady bowed condescendingly; the affable manner suddenly filmed with ice. Her penetration, upon which she prided herself, had been deceived. This young person was only to be Mr. Blissett’s assistant colour-mixer—or, at best, humble companion. She had wasted one of her most gracious smiles upon a plebeian.

‘Very good, Sir: I will send up supper at once.

I think you said cold meat would be sufficient—and here she looked towards the new lodger—‘perhaps some beer.’

‘My dear Mrs. Maude,’ said Mr. Blissett with his bantering smile and air, ‘your sagacity puts me to the blush. I should never have thought of beer (nor, indeed, as far as *I* am concerned, of supper either), but my young friend has both appetite and digestion. I dare say he *does* drink beer.’

At supper, in his own chamber, you would not have known Mr. Frederick Blissett for the same man that had been so nervous in the empty streets, so easily frightened by the touch of a policeman, so fanciful about a cabman’s coat. His manner, if not genially lively, was airy; and his jocosity upon the state of his companion’s wardrobe and poverty in general, deserved a more prosperous audience; at the same time, he did not spare himself.

‘I spoke of my library, Mr. Steen, did I not, when we were at the Refuge? It is hard, if we poor devils of artists may not brag a little, but the fact is, the father of a child who goes out in a perambulator might just as well speak of his carriage. In the the studio yonder are all the books I possess, or am likely to possess. I am a younger brother, with nothing but the proceeds of my art to live upon. I look to you, by-the-bye, to increase my income in that way, and I will show you how to-morrow; but it never does to cry “Poverty.” I recommend you to throw all those unfashionable garments of yours into the fire to-night. There is a cunning fool coming to breakfast with us to-morrow, who judges every man by the cut

of his clothes and the length of his purse; and that reminds me he will be here by ten o'clock, and I must be up and ready for him. I had such a very short night—that is, I slept so little, being out of sorts—that I shall be glad to get to bed.'

He rose and held out his hand. 'There is gas in your bed-room; but I suppose you have not been so exclusively accustomed to wax-candles as not to know how to turn it out.'

Mr. Blissett had touched neither bit nor sup, while his companion was satisfying the cravings of a workhouse appetite; but he now broke off a crumb of bread, and poured himself out a wine-glass of French brandy.

'Here's to our success as artist and model, Mr. Steen! You are young, and don't know dyspepsia or the blessings of *eau-de-vie*. I suffer torments—not unmerited, I dare say, but very unpleasant. If you hear me walking about my room, it is only my usual custom; or if I talk in my sleep—the partition being thin—or even bawl like a bull, don't pay the slightest attention to my nonsense. The gray mare is the better horse, they say, of married men; but as for me, "Nightmare" is my tyrant.'

'I am very sorry to hear it, Mr. Blissett,' said the young man warmly. 'If a good conscience—the knowledge of having done a most kindly act to a friendless lad, and that in a most kindly way—can win you slumber, I am sure you deserve it. I shall never more believe, as I have somewhere read, that want of sleep is the portion of the wicked.'

Mr. Blissett's eyes did not widen with astonishment, because it was not their habit to do so ; they darted into contiguous corners : he rose from his seat, stared at his young friend in a very menacing manner, and with a sharp 'Good-night, Sir,' abruptly left the room, slamming the door behind him.





CHAPTER VII.

THE LETTER WITH A BLACK EDGE.

PENETRATED with gratitude as the young man was, just warmed and filled by Mr. Blissett's dressing gown and supper, he could not but acknowledge to himself that that gentleman was scarcely less eccentric than benevolent. How was it that he could possibly have offended him in the mere expression of his thanks? Mr. Charles Steen, although barely arrived at man's estate, had had (as will presently be seen) no little experience of queer people and their odd ways, but the conduct of his present patron was stranger than anything he had witnessed. The inconsistency of his behaviour struck him even more than its eccentricity. His nervous terrors, his strong material sense, his beneficence, his cynicism, and now his whimsical and groundless displeasure! How was he to comport himself in order to please so capricious a patron! When Mr. Blissett told him that he had but broken sleep, he did not exaggerate the matter. Tired as the lad was, and rest-provoking as seemed his couch, in comparison with that to which he

had of late been used, he was awakened again and again by the noises from his neighbour's room. Now it was plain that his host was pacing restlessly to and fro, now tossing and tumbling upon his bed, now muttering snatches of talk in uneasy slumber. 'I'll take it. Take *that* !' he once exclaimed, and then struck with nightmare violence some object—chair or bedpost—which echoed dully. Towards morning, like one wearied out, he seemed to fall into a heavy sleep, for when the young man arose, at a somewhat early hour, there was no sound from the neighbouring chamber. Steen had burned his rags, as his patron had recommended, on the previous night, and now dressed himself in the first suit of clothes that came to his hand in the wardrobe. Nobody in the house seemed stirring; the parlour was just as he had left it the preceding night—so he wandered with noiseless feet into the studio.

This was a very large and lofty room, lit by a skylight, and seemed to be even more spacious from its lack of furniture. Its floor was bare except for a strip of carpet in the middle, for the accommodation of any model who might have to stand there with naked feet; a sort of pedestal provided with a couple of steps, and mounted upon wheels, was in one corner; a painter's easel stood by the fireplace, with an unfinished sketch upon it; several bulging portfolios leaned against the walls, and on the chairs and floor were a few books. It would certainly not have taken a quarter of an hour to arrange Mr. Frederick Blissett's library. What struck the young man most, however, was the immense size of the pictures on the walls. There were but

three of these, yet they lined the whole apartment as completely as tapestry. It was no wonder poor Frank Blissett had said that few people had room for his brother's pictures. Nor were their subjects—the nature of each of which was set forth in gold letters within the frame—less peculiar than their size. On one wall, was portrayed a scene of barbaric magnificence: a king of ancient France, waited upon at table by his chief nobility, all on horseback. The horses were clumsy enough, irresistibly reminding one of the stud of Messrs. Barclay and Perkins, and corroborating his sister-in-law's remark, that Frederick was not an animal painter: the gentlemen of the County Hunt would scarcely have liked their steeds to be so represented. The countenances both of king and nobles were expressive enough; but what was most remarkable in this, as in the other pictures, was the splendour of the colouring, which was rich and gorgeous in the extreme, although without vulgarity or gaudiness.

Another of these works of art represented a modern library. A noble lady, still beautiful though of middle age, was standing by a book-case with a thin folio open in her hand, and a face of unspeakable horror and anguish. A man's countenance was shown at the half-open door behind her, full of alarm and pity. This was the Countess of Bedford, discovering for the first time in *The Trial of the Earl and Countess of Somerset*, the guilt and depravity of her parents! Both male and female figures were in mourning (for the recent death of their son, Lord William Russell), but the magnificence of the scene displayed was, in its way, as striking as in the preceding work. The third

picture, dim and foggy as the morning was, seemed literally to glow upon the walls, so brilliant were the hues of which it was composed. A majestic woman, clothed in flowing garments, of imperial gold and purple, was drinking with reverent eyes, like one at sacrament, from a golden goblet rough with precious stones. In the distance was a mausoleum of shining marble, huge as a pyramid. This, the legend that ran beneath informed the spectator, was Artemesia, Queen of Caria, who drank up the ashes of her beloved husband Mausolus dissolved in wine.

So intent was the young man upon the investigation of this last curiosity (for such even the painter's detractors allowed it to be) that when his patron presently entered the apartment, he still stood before the canvas quite unconscious of his presence. No flattery that words could have conveyed would have been half so delicate as such a circumstance, and besides its genuineness was above suspicion. At the sight of the rapt youth, Frederick Blissett's knitted brow grew smooth, and his mouth, which was working in a nervous and unpleasant manner, shaped itself into a smile.

'So Artemesia pleases you, does she, Mr. Steen?'

The young man gave a start of surprise, turned round, and was about to express his opinion, when the painter suddenly grew ghastly pale. 'Why wear those clothes?' cried he hoarsely: 'get another suit.'

'They lay at the top of the rest, Sir,' said the other apologetically, though lost in wonder.

With shaking finger, the painter pointed to the

waistcoat, upon which two stains of iron-mould were visible.

‘I know it, Sir,’ continued the young man. ‘I tried to rub them off, but could not. I thought the clothes were good enough for me. And by-the-bye, there was some money in the pockets, Sir——’

‘Keep it—burn it! How dare you stand there arguing, when I say change those clothes!—Look here, Steen,’ added the painter in calmer tones; ‘you must not cross me—it is bad for people to do that; you must not contradict. Go, get another suit; then join me here again.’

The young man did as he was bid. When he returned, the fire in the painting-room, which before was ready laid, was lit, and Mr. Blissett, standing by it, looking at the unfinished sketch; his eyes, that is, were directed towards it, but they had a pre-occupied though attentive look; it seemed as though he was listening for some expected sound. It was not, however, for the return of his young friend, for he did not look up when he entered, nor make the least remark as to his change of costume. The former suit, although quite suitable to the position of a gentleman, had been of a rough and country sort; the clothes he now wore were of fine materials and fashionable make. Except for the bright intelligence of his features, you might have taken Mr. Charles Steen for a young Guardsman.

‘Do you know who Lucius Sylla was?’ inquired the painter, pointing to the chief of the two figures in his sketch—a tall dark Roman of ancient times, stern-looking and contemptuous; his arms folded in his

cloak ; and evidently administering to the other and younger figure (whose features were not yet painted in) some sharp rebuke.

‘ Lucius Sylla was a dictator, was he not, Sir ? ’

‘ He was, and a severe one ; but he voluntarily resigned his post. Afterwards, when a dissolute youth met him in the street, shorn of his greatness, and insulted him, he is said to have exclaimed : “ This young man will be the cause that nobody henceforth will resign a dictatorship.”—I shall call the piece *Lost Power*. With your features, I shall fill in yonder—— Did you hear a bell ring ? ’

‘ Yes, Sir, I think I did. ’

‘ Ah ! ’ Mr. Blissett was certainly listening now. His eyes, his ears, the very hairs of his head seemed to be saying : ‘ We watch, we hear. ’

‘ That was the click of the letter-box, Sir. Shall I go and see if there is one for you ? ’

‘ No. I expect none ; or if I do, nothing welcome. When you come to my time of life, young man, you will not be eager to meet the post. ’

Involuntarily as his patron said these words, Charles Steen glanced at the figure on the easel : Lucius Sylla and Frederick Blissett were evidently one. The two faces, indeed, had little more than a family likeness ; but the expression of cynicism, contempt, and even of cruelty was identical.

The artist took his pencil, and began to sketch from his model ; but his hand trembled, so that he made a double-chin of the young fellow’s pointed one, and gave a second tip to his aquiline nose.

‘ It is so cursedly cold, Steen, that my fingers shake. ’

We must wait for the fire to burn up a little. Go and see whether they are getting on with the breakfast.'

The table was laid for three; but there were knives, and forks, and plates for half a dozen, and a copper kettle on the hob was singing cheerily. A naphtha lamp was burning by the side of a silver coffee-pot. Everything spoke of comfort, superfluity, save one thing, which hinted loss. Upon the white table-cloth lay a letter edged with deepest black.

'Is everything ready?' inquired Mr. Blissett from the inner room in a strange voice.

'Yes, Sir, except the dishes.'

'Ring for them; it is near ten o'clock.—Are there no duns this morning, Steen?'

'There's only one letter, Sir, with a deep black edge.'

No answer. Perhaps he had not heard those last words.

The young man rang the bell, and bade the servant bring the breakfast; but still the master waited. At last he came with a careless step, and humming a lively air.

'A letter, did you say, Steen? and black too? Good God! it has the Ashworth postmark! That is where my—— Alas, alas!' Mr. Blissett hid his face in his fine cambric handkerchief, and groaned.

'I am afraid you have bad news, Sir?'

The artist shook his head, and pushed the letter towards his companion. 'Read.'

'DEAR UNCLE FREDERICK—A most dreadful thing has happened. Papa is dead. Pity us. Pity my

dear mother. He was thrown from his horse—— I cannot write it. O my dear papa, whom we all loved so! Come down at once.—Your affectionate niece, CHRISTIE.'

'Your brother, Sir? And this is his daughter? What a terrible blow!'

'It crushes me, Steen. Help me to the sofa.'

'Would you rather be alone, Sir?'

'No, no; don't leave me. I am unnerved: I am very ill. I had a letter from him but two days ago. It is too sharp and sudden.'

There was a double knock at the front door.

'Shall I tell this gentleman whom you expect that you cannot see him?'

'No; he will not believe you. There are some men, Steen, who only care for money. This news that prostrates *me*—— Tell him to come in.'

Knuckles had been already unceremoniously applied to the parlour-door, and the owner of the same, scarcely waiting for the permission to enter, at once presented himself—a short, thick-set, swarthy man, very well dressed, indeed somewhat too handsomely.

A heavy gold chain hung on each side of his ample waistcoat; upon his large white hand, obtrusively displayed, sparkled a fine diamond ring.

'Holloa,' said he, looking at his prostrate host upon the sofa with his face to the wall, 'what is our little game now?'

'Hush, Sir!' interposed the young man sternly; 'Mr. Blissett has had bad news.' He pointed to

the signs of mourning on the letter. 'His niece, Miss Christie——'

'Very sad, I dare say,' put in the stranger rudely ; 'but young people often die.—I hope, Sir'—here he turned towards the artist—'that this will not be made a pretext for delay. I am in sad want of money myself. That two thousand pounds must be paid this morning, let me tell you, or you will find yourself in Queer Street, and you know what street that is.'

Charles Steen clenched his fingers, and in another moment would certainly have impressed the speaker in the same unfavourable way as he had impressed deputy-master Curtis, but Mr. Blissett suddenly looked up with : 'Give the man the letter ;' and he gave it.

'Now, I wonder,' said Mr. Ashden quietly, when he had possessed himself of its contents, 'whether *this* is another little game of yours or not, Mr. Frederick Blissett ?'

'It is true, man—only too true,' returned that gentleman with a sigh. 'You are very brutal, Ashden, but I am in no humour to quarrel with anyone this morning. Sit down and eat ; as for me, I have no appetite for anything. You called here yesterday, but I was in bed and ill. I had had a shocking night. If I had been well, I should have run down to Newnham for a day's hunting. My poor brother offered—but two days ago, think of that!—to give me a mount. Who could have thought it? Who could have dreamed of such a catastrophe! He fell upon the frozen ground, I suppose.'

'Very likely,' said Mr. Ashden, making a large inroad upon the savory omelet. 'For my part, I do my

hunting—and I hunt foxes too, of a certain sort—in a brougham. Well, you must bear up. It is an ill wind that blows nobody good, Mr. Frederick. It is near three thousand a year in land, that Morden property, is it not? If you are in want of any ready money, my dear Sir, you can have it to any amount, and I need not say on reasonable terms.'

'I thought you said you were in want of money yourself?' For an instant, the old sardonic look came over Mr. Blissett's face—the malicious twinkle in the half-shut eyes.

'So I am, Sir,' returned the other quite unabashed. 'I am deuced hard up so far as I am personally concerned; but I have got a friend——'

'Have you? I am surprised to hear it, Ashden. He must be a curious fellow; but I don't want to know him. You shall have your bond, principal and interest in a few weeks.'

'Just as you like, Sir; just when you please, Mr. Frederick. Perhaps there will be some things wanted at the Hall, and very likely some things *not* wanted. Libraries bought or exchanged, eh?'

'Ah, Steen,' sighed Mr. Blissett, 'how many a true word is said in jest. It was only last night, you know, we spoke of that. You will be my librarian after all.'

'Young gentleman beginning life, Sir?' inquired Mr. Ashden, with a smirk intended to propitiate. 'Couldn't have a better teacher than Mr. Blissett here. There's a pleasant time before you, doubtless; and if, before you come of age, you should want a little assistance, most happy, I am sure. Our friend here will give me a good character. No bad wine,

no daubs of pictures — all *bonâ fide* ready-money. Noblemen or gentlemen's personal security quite sufficient.'

'Borrow a thousand of him, Steen, at thirty per cent., to be repaid upon your coming into your property.'

Mr. Blissett so far forgot his bereavement as to indulge in a dry chuckle over these words. Mr. Ashden began to fumble in his breast-pocket for the lawful materials of his calling.

'I do not wish you to be under a misapprehension about me, Mr. Ashden,' said Steen reddening. 'I have no money, nor any expectation of it. It was only last night that——'

'Stop a bit, Steen,' said Mr. Blissett, with authority. 'Let me explain your position, and especially your relations with me, myself.—You know a good many of my lot, Ashden, and may retail to them what I say, which will save me trouble. This young gentleman (who has besides been of service to me) is the son of a dear friend of mine. I have long felt the want of a companion; and though I was but yesterday a poor man enough, as you well know, I offered him a home here. He will now be my amanuensis and confidential agent—yes, Charles, you deserve that—and any person who treats him with disrespect will offend *me*.'

'Exactly; I quite perceive,' said Mr. Ashden, with a cunning smile. 'He has inherited a feature or two, if the law prevents him from inheriting anything else. I dare say he'll be a comfort to you: more, perhaps, than some lawful sons one knows of, who are more

interested in the death of their fathers than in keeping them alive.'

Again the young man's face began to redden, and again Mr. Blissett staid his speech by a warning finger.

'You may think what you like, Ashden, and I cannot prevent your gossiping with others; but henceforth this subject is a forbidden one, remember, between you and me.—Will you have a cup of tea after your coffee?—Nothing more? Well, I am afraid I cannot offer you a cigar this morning: my nerves are not in a fit state.'

'I have business myself, Mr. Frederick, at 11.15,' returned the other, pulling out a large gold repeater. 'Punctuality, you know, is one of my few virtues.—Pray, do not hurry yourself about that little matter of the two thousand.—Good-bye, my dear Sir.—Good-bye, Mr. Charles——'

'Steen,' interposed Mr. Blissett quietly.

'Good-bye, Mr. Charles Steen.'

As his visitor left the house, the painter stepped to the window, and watched his departure through the blind. A neat pair-horse brougham stood at the door; and beside the coachman sat an individual in rusty black, not by any means like a gentleman's servant. But for that little letter with the mournful edge, Mr. Frederick Blissett would, I think, have occupied the vacant seat in the carriage, and the person on the box would have given orders to the coachman to drive to—Queer Street.



CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE STUDIO.

‘**T**HAT guest of ours had a writ in his pocket,’ said Mr. Blissett drily, turning from the window, as the brougham drove away. ‘I wish you had got him to lend you a thousand pounds, curse him!’

‘He was much too clever a person to have done that, I think, Sir.’

‘Not at all, my young friend; it is just those vulgar, cunning scoundrels, who fancy they know so much, that get taken in. They plume themselves—at least this Ashden and men of his kidney do—upon bold strokes. He fancied he saw in you a lad of fortune and family, just loose upon the town; your notions of honour unsullied, a thing they calculate upon more than you would imagine, considering that among themselves the thing doesn’t exist. He would have taken your name upon his paper as a pike snaps at a perch. I tell you, if this letter had not been genuine, if we two had concocted it, we might have sent him clean away minus all that money. Gad, think of that!’

Don't look shocked, my lad. I only say Supposing. One may suppose anything.—Have you a drop of coffee left? Good. Get the brandy out of yonder cupboard. Those two things go better together than even Ashden's bays—my bays, that is, which Ashden drives; but he will not get another pair out of me. Come; my hand is steady enough now: let us do a little more sketching. You think me hard-hearted, Steen, because I can go on with my work after receiving yonder letter? But it is because I feel it, and wish to forget it, Sir, that I work. Time enough to be sad when I have to answer it—any time before five o'clock.'

'Then you are not going down to Allgrove, Sir, as the young lady begs?'

'Good Heavens! do I look in a fit state to go? Did I seem so yesterday, Mr. Steen? You must be a very unobservant person,' exclaimed the painter vehemently; 'and yet you have quick feelings, too, forsooth—fine susceptibilities. You would have taken that honest gentleman by the throat just now, because he hinted you were son of mine. I let him go away with that belief, for many reasons, but chiefly for your own sake: our supposed relationship will at least secure you more respect than your real position. If he had known you came from the Refuge for the Destitute, do you suppose that Mr. Ashden would have sat at the same table, or that if Mrs. Maude knew she would have cooked that omelet for you? If you suppose that, indeed, you should not blame me for supposing. Look here, Charles Steen. We must understand one another, or, at all events, you must

understand *me*. Yesterday, you were a beggar; to-day, you are a gentleman. I have set you on horseback, don't——'

'I know the proverb, Mr. Blissett,' interrupted the young man earnestly; 'but I had rather not hear it from your lips. You have been so very, very good to me; I wish to be *all* gratitude, *all* respect; I wish to have no place in my heart unpenetrated by your kindness; I wish——'

'Tut, man; *three* wishes!' interrupted the painter coldly. 'You remind me of the fool in the fairy tale: "I wish we had black puddings for supper. I wish one stuck to your nose, goodman. I wish it off again." What you mean to say is: Continue to be my benefactor, but do not take out your benefits in disagreeable speeches. A very natural sentiment, but one which you are scarcely in a position to entertain; it is too much of a luxury. Seriously, who wants to insult you? Pooh, pooh! You must learn to put up with my little ways.'

If Charles Steen's handsome face had not been so cast down, he could not have failed to mark his patron's eyes; they regarded him so like a cat that plays with a mouse, half amused, half cruel.

'If I was the brute you take me for,' continued he, 'I might say a quarrel is impossible between us; a quarrel, that is, upon your side. You cannot leave my roof, because you have no clothes to go in. Whatever you possess is mine. But I make use of no such arguments. Be obedient, be docile; that is all I ask. I like your spirit, young man. You have got good blood in you from one side, at least, I'll warrant.—

There, there; I meant nothing to your mother's discredit. Come along; and while I sketch your face, you shall tell me your ancestry, unfold your family tree. Begin from the Conqueror, if you please; but perhaps I offend again, for he was a natural son.—That is just how I wish you to look—a trifle insolent, you know, like the young fellow who is bearding Lucius Sylla. That's capital. You don't mind standing up for a little, do you? Good. Just a half-turn to the right, please. Now, for your history; or do you prefer being questioned by counsel? Have you a father, have you a mother? as sentimental Tom sings in his *Bridge of Sighs*.'

'I am an orphan, Sir.'

'I am glad to hear it. It may seem selfish, but I don't like a divided allegiance; I wish to be father, and mother, and all to you. Who was your papa?'

'He was an officer in the Indian army, Sir.'

'Goodness gracious! Then Ashden may be right after all. Time and place concur to make it probable, and, I may add, complexion, though it must be confessed that for good looks the second generation has the advantage.'

'My father died in battle, Sir,' continued the young man gravely; 'and a brother-officer, who fought by his side in his last field, became my protector at a time when I needed a friend even more than last night. My mother had died in giving me birth, and I was left a child in the care of hired servants, and there was no money wherewith to pay them. Captain Mangoe——'

'I knew that man,' interposed Mr. Blissett; 'I've got a sketch of him somewhere; and he has an I O U of mine; that is, if it has been carried to his account in the next world; for he is dead, I fancy, is he not?'

'He died six months ago, Sir. For five years in India, and for six in England, he was a father to me, though for the last period only by proxy. I was brought up along with his own children at Cayenne Lodge, in Staffordshire, where Mrs. Mangoe and her family resided.'

'Ah, I remember that woman. She was a Tartar, was she not, my young friend? Not a sort of person to appreciate a husband's friend's orphan boy in her house, I should think. Quite a forbidden degree of relationship, eh? I thought so.'

'She was a hard woman, Sir, to me. I always endeavoured to respect her, for Captain Mangoe's sake, but my presence under her roof was hateful to her, and she had no hesitation in letting me see it. Many a kind message from him to me, I well know, she omitted to deliver; but the little presents he sent from time to time showed that he had not forgotten me. She did not dare keep *them* back, lest he should find it out on his return. But as you know, Sir, he never did return; and when the news of his death arrived, I was made to feel the difference.'

'So I should think,' broke in the painter laughing. 'How well I remember those Mangoes! We used to call them Curry and Rice. *She* was Curry, of course. It was wonderful that he ever allowed her to leave India alive, there are so many opportunities in that country of getting rid of shrews. She had two horrid

boys, had she not—Deville Curries? Ah! you must have had a nice time of it as they grew up. Mrs. M. starved you, and the young ones beat you, eh?’

‘They could not beat me, Sir,’ answered the young fellow proudly; ‘but they had a tutor, a supple fawning knave, who, when Captain Mangoe died——’

‘I see,’ chuckled Mr. Blissett, while the other blushed and hesitated—‘made up to the widow by pitching into the orphan. Very natural, if not very right. He’ll marry her within the year, my good Sir, and then you’ll be amply avenged. So, as soon as Mangoe went aloft, this tutor began to larrup you. It’s quite a little drama; with that East India pickle in it, too, that used to be so popular with our playgoers of a quarter of a century ago. Pray, go on; you amuse me. Well, you had all these enemies; had you not any friends?’

‘I had one, Sir. There was a Mr. Madden, who lived close by, and had known my poor father——’

‘What! Starke Madden?—the Honourable Starke, of the Bombay irregulars?’

‘The same, Sir.’

‘O, this is charming; why, we have all our friends in common, Steen! Madden was the cleverest fellow in India. Did not possess a shilling, and never spent less than three thousand a year. Lived on loot, some people said. And had a large family too. Every luxury, confound the fellow!’

‘He had five boys, Sir; and, as you say, he was said to have spent a good deal of money. I am sure I have no right to reproach him, for he gave me many a half-sovereign. He was the only person who was

kind to me after Captain Mangoe's death, and I told him how I was treated. "Well, look here, Charley," said he. "I am a bad adviser, for I can't even advise myself; at least, that's what people say, and damme if I don't believe they're right. But it seems to me your getting very hard lines; and if I was in your place, I'm frizzled" (you remember his language, Sir) "if I wouldn't run away."

'His language!' chuckled Mr. Blissett—'Starke Madden's language! O yes, I remember it. How did Mother Mangoe, who was so "serious," contrive to accept his protestations, his ejaculations? But there, if ever a woman dearly loved a lord—I don't mean *her* lord—it was old Curry: and I dare say Starke's being an Honourable atoned for a good deal. But what on earth did he visit Cayenne Lodge for? Not for *her*, I'll take my oath. Was it for his grub?'

'He dined there pretty often, Sir,' said the young man smiling; 'and, indeed, as I found out afterwards, the larder at Madden House was not very well furnished.'

'Yes, Mother Mangoe understood the art of eating,' observed the painter reflectively; 'and it was also whispered, that of drinking. But I don't wish you to betray the weaknesses of your dear benefactress.—Well, "I'm frizzled if I wouldn't run away," said Madden. What did *you* say?'

'I said: "Where shall I run to, Mr. Madden?'" "Run to me, run to Madden House," answered he laughing. "I can offer you but little, and that little not for long; for, between ourselves, I shall myself have to bolt one of these fine days. But there is a

spare bed, and a knife and fork for you while I'm there." I said something about my unwillingness to be a charge upon him, but he answered that the advantage would be upon his side, since I could teach his boys. "You're a doosid clever fellow, Charley, *you* are; you know Greek and Latin, and a number of other useful arts, although, may I be boiled if I ever saw the good of them; and you shall teach my boys. Our tutor left the place last week because he couldn't live any longer upon rabbits (by-the-bye, I hope you like rabbits), and you shall take his place whenever you like. Don't you stand any more nonsense from this scoundrel here, who's wanting to step into poor Mangoe's shoes. My advice is (if you *will* have it), the very next time he offers to lay a finger on you, you knock him head over tip—straight out from the shoulder—this way. Ready money is uncommon short with me, but if you break the bridge of his nose, Charley, I will give you a sovereign."

'And did both events come off?' asked Mr. Blissett coolly, as he stepped back to look at the effect of his sketch.

'No, Sir. I did knock the tutor "head over tip," though, and did break the bridge of his nose. He had no right to strike me, Sir, for I had done no wrong; and besides, I was almost a man. Then I walked straight out of the house, with nothing to call my own but the clothes I stood in—they were the rags I burned in your fire last night.'

'Capital!' said Mr. Blissett drily. 'Some men pride themselves upon being the architects of their own fortune—generally offensive people, by-the-bye—but

you, at an early age, have distinguished yourself as a demolisher. You interest me more and more. Life at Madden House must have been a great joke.'

'Mr. Madden was very kind to me, Sir,' returned the young man gravely; 'kinder than'—he was about to say, 'than anybody ever was;' but he noticed the pencil suddenly cease to move, and the attitude of his host become in an instant fixed and rigid, so—'kinder than words can say,' added Charles Steen. A less observant eye than his own would have perceived that this singular man, who took no pains to ingratiate himself beyond the mere benefits he conferred, was of a jealous nature, and would have resented any expressed preference of a former patron. And yet the lad's heart smote him the next moment for having obeyed the instinct, and he hastened to repair his error. 'I could not tell you of my life under that roof, Sir, merely to amuse you. Whatever may have been Mr. Madden's social shortcomings, to me he was most generous——'

'But he had nothing, my good Sir,' interposed Mr. Blissett with a sneer. 'We can all be generous with what is not our own. He did not even pay you, it seems, the sovereign he promised you.'

'He said he hadn't got one, Sir, and I believe him. But he gave me a pony worth ten times the money; only it was seized, of course, with all the other things, when the bailiffs came. He had plenty of horses, at the time I speak of, in his stable—each of the boys, indeed, had one for himself. His house, too, was a very large and handsome one, though sparsely furnished: and there was a good

deal of ground about it, and capital rabbit-shooting. I soon understood why the late tutor had given up the situation.

Of rabbits hot, and rabbits cold,
Of rabbits young, and rabbits old,
Of rabbits tender, and rabbits tough,
Thank you, my lord, I've had enough,

were the lines he quoted (to the Honourable Starke Madden's immense delight), when he threw up his appointment. "The only rabbit you won't taste here, Charley," said my laughing host, "is Welsh-rabbit, for, may I be toasted myself, if anybody will credit us with a cheese." The whole family lived like a primeval household, upon the products of the chase, or rather the rabbit-warren. But for the food furnished by that fecund animal, and for eggs, we should all have been vegetarians. Butcher's-meat was never seen: but though there was no gardener, we grew our own salads and potatoes. There had been a great store of flour in the house, laid in by its provident head before the supplies were cut off, and we baked our own bread; but even this resource began to fail. Mr. Madden had done his best for the garrison, by victualling it in the first instance from a distance, leaving the immediate neighbourhood rich and unharried, but, after a while, everything grew as bare about us as though we had been locusts. He had applied to his brother, the Earl of March Hare (and head of the family), for money so often, that he had been forbidden the house; but on one occasion, which I shall never forget, he sent the five boys and me, all mounted, over to Hare Castle; and the old lord

gave us lunch, and a five-pound note apiece to each of his nephews, accompanied, however, with such unpleasant remarks, that I declined to go again. Finally, the earl got his brother an appointment abroad—the governorship of some small island—and one fine morning the Honourable Starke Madden was missing; he had, as he had predicted to me would be the case, been obliged “to bolt,” like our friends the rabbits from their burrows, so close were the ferrets behind him, and that very day the bailiffs took possession. But Mr. Madden, I am glad to say, got safe away out of the country; and all his boys have since joined his Excellency in his distant home. When the execution was put in, there was nothing for me to do but to walk up to London, like Dick Whittington, and seek my fortune. I had not one penny; I slept in outhouses, and where I could; by the time I reached London, my clothes were in rags, and my shoes in holes. I did not beg, but applied at a work-house for relief, and was transferred to the Refuge, where you found me.—That is my story, Sir.’

Mr. Blissett nodded, nursed his chin in his hand, and regarded his young friend attentively.

‘I believe you have told me the truth,’ said he at last.

‘Indeed, I hope so, Sir.’

‘From Mr. Madden’s remark to you, Steen, I conclude you are something of a scholar. If I were engaged in collecting editions of the classics, you might be of great service to me; but as it is, I would rather you knew how to mix colours.’

‘I am very sorry, Sir, that I cannot make myself

more useful to you. When you have done this sketch, it seems to me that my occupation is gone.'

'Well, perhaps it would have been but for this sad news from Allgrove; but it's an ill wind that blows nobody good, and there will now be matters to arrange down there in which your assistance may be needed. I dare say the library is not catalogued, and there may be some other things to occupy you—for a week or two.'

'Very good, Sir,' answered the other, but in a tone which hardly suited the words. When one has suffered hunger and cold, and then enjoyed warmth and comfort, the prospect of returning to the former state is not alluring. If Mr. Frederick Blissett's manner was at times scornful, yet one proud man's contumely seemed easier to this poor young fellow to be borne than that long catalogue of whips and scorns to which indigence must needs submit from every hand, from every tongue.

'If I could count upon your fidelity, indeed,' continued Mr. Blissett musing; 'but then I have only known you for twelve hours or so. If, as my confidential agent (so to speak) and companion——'

'O Sir! believe me——'

'Hush! Let me finish. A companion, you know, Mr. Steen, is generally an unhappy woman, who has to endure the whims and ill-temper of some old haridan; to feed her parrot, to take her lap-dog for a walk, and on Sundays to read sermons aloud until her mistress drops asleep. It is true, I have neither bird nor beast—I am lord neither of the fowl nor the brute—and I think I can promise you that you will not

have to read me sermons ; but as for whims, I have plenty of them. My temper, too, is not of the best, and what is worse, it is uncertain : the navigation is dangerous, and the channel is not buoyed. I am subject to "tantrums." Unfortunately, I don't swear, like Starke Madden, and therefore there is no safety-valve. I blow up. Beware, Charles Steen ; never thwart me, never cross me, or it will be the worse for you. Do not venture to express an opinion when you know it will be distasteful to me. Do you understand, young Sir ?'

The very reference to his own irritability of disposition seemed to have driven Mr. Blissett to the verge of a 'tantrum.' He spoke with hurried vehemence, his eyes converged in a most unpleasant manner, and he snapped the pencil with which he was working into half-a-dozen pieces, and threw them into the fire.

'I understand, Sir, and will do my very best to please you,' returned the young man earnestly ; 'but——'

"But" is a word I forbid you to use,' interrupted the painter peevishly. 'You say you will do your best, and that is sufficient. I take you at your word. Henceforward, you have no interest to serve, no orders to obey but mine ; no human being to strive to please but me. You will have a hundred a year for pocket-money—for young men must buy their pleasures—only look you well that yours never clash with duty, that is, your duty to me : all your expenses in other respects will of course be defrayed. Here is five pounds on account of the one, and five pounds on

the other. You will undertake a journey for me at once—this afternoon. Take whatever you need of linen and clothes from my wardrobe, and put them in a portmanteau. You may be away some days—or weeks : I cannot tell.’

‘Then you do not go with me, Sir?’

‘No,’ answered the painter with irritation. ‘Did I not tell you that I was to ill too leave the house? If not, I will tell it you now, and mind, when you are asked, to answer as I tell you. I send you in my place because I am so indisposed ; the doctor has forbidden me to stir abroad. Remember *that*.’

The young man bowed, and was about to leave the room. ‘There is no “but,” Sir,’ said he with his hand upon the door. ‘I obey you of course ; yet I am sorry not to be permitted to show my gratitude in nursing you. To be ill and alone is very sad.’

‘Who told you that?’ cried Mr. Blissett, running up and seizing him by the arm. ‘Who said it was sad to be alone? Did I complain? Yes, in my sleep I did : I talked some nonsense. Now, what was it?’

‘You cried out, and struck your hand, Sir. I noticed it was badly bruised this morning. That’s all.’

‘That’s *all*? And enough too, I think. A spy? You noticed, did you? Henceforth, take note of nothing. What! you watch me, do you?’

‘Indeed, I do not, Sir. Only I was sorry you had hurt yourself, and would have said so, but that you seemed to dislike to be troubled by such questions.’

‘Just so ; I do. I don’t want folk’s pity. Of course, it’s lonely being alone. That was one of the reasons

why I brought you here—to keep me company. There, there ; I dare say you meant no impertinence : it was but a trick of my whimsical temper to suppose you did. Go and pack your things. In the meantime, I have a letter to write, which will explain your coming, and contain your credentials. It will take me half an hour.'

In half an hour exactly, Charles Steen presented himself, equipped for travel, and portmanteau in hand.

Mr. Blissett was in the parlour, very pale. He seemed to be much agitated.

'So you are going to leave me, are you, Steen?'

'Nay, Sir ; it is you who send me away.'

'True ; but there is no hurry. There is plenty of time, is there not?'

'I do not know, Sir. You have not told me when the train starts—or whence, or whither—which is to take me. It is now two o'clock.'

'Two? Why, that is lunch-time. You can't go without lunch ;' and he hurriedly pulled the bell.

'Thank you, Sir ; I have made too good a breakfast to need anything at present. Shall I call a cab?'

'No, no ; Mary will do that. You have got no railway wrapper, Steen ; take one out of my bed-room. You will travel first-class, of course ; but you will be starved of cold going over the downs.'

'The downs, Sir? What downs?'

'Why, between Chudleigh—that's your station, you know—and Allgrove on the Rill.'

'Allgrove?'

'Yes, of course. You will take this letter, which explains everything ; but you must also tell them

much—how ill I have been, and how utterly prostrated I am by the news of this calamity.—Mary, fetch a cab—a Hansom.—Then you can drive quickly, and need not hurry away now. I am so nervous, that your departure quite upsets me. Give me a little glass of brandy. I rely upon you for every information. Send me word exactly how you find the widow—my sister-in-law. What she says about me, too. Do you hear? And what everybody says. I wish to hear all the news. You will, of course, say how dreadfully cut up I am at this lamentable occurrence. As to being of service to Christie, of course I am zealous, being her uncle; but I should likewise—and particularly—desire to make myself useful to Mrs. Blissett. Do you understand?—Thousand devils, there's the cab! Upon my life, I think I will go down with you after all. But I can't—I can't.'

'I suppose, Sir, if you feel better, you will come down to the funeral?'

'What!' Mr. Blissett sank down in his arm-chair, breathing hard. 'How dare you? Seeing the state to which I am reduced. Be off! Why do you linger? You will miss the train.'

'You have forgotten to seal the letter, Sir.'

'I did that on purpose. You may read it going along. You are my confidential—friend, remember. The letter explains it all—except about my illness. Tell them how ill I was last night, and the night before, when this sad business happened.—Good-bye.'

The young man stepped forward, and took his patron's hand—it was cold and damp as a sponge.



CHAPTER IX.

MR. CHARLES STEEN PICKS UP SOME INFORMATION.

THE change in Mr. Charles Steen's social position—but yesterday in the pauper's ward, and to-day well and warmly clad, traveling by first-class on special mission—had been great and sudden. But then he was used to changes. Moreover, he had been in the straits of penury only a few days, which seemed more like an unpleasant dream than rude reality. The rank of a gentleman was what he had always held. He felt himself, therefore, rather reinstated in his former condition than elevated from a very low one. And as for the future, he had never had any great expectations in that direction ; and he was but seventeen, and by nature buoyant. Not a passenger who saw him step into the train would have imagined this handsome young gentleman to have but five pounds in the world which he could call his own, or that the very mourning suit he wore belonged to another man. His mind was scarcely at all taken up with his own affairs ; he thought of his patron,

who was still an enigma to him, to solve which there now seemed only one way—namely, to conclude that he was not entirely sane. And he thought of the undertaking on which he himself was at present engaged. What sort of people would be his hostess and her daughter; and how would they conduct themselves in their calamity? Although Charles Steen had suffered so much at the dire hands of death, he had never been brought face to face with it. When the news of good Captain Mangoe's demise had reached Cayenne Lodge, it had been borne with equanimity by all, and by his widow with the most submissive resignation. The news of loss—especially when coming from far away, and thereby already seeming long ago—is a very different thing from that visible bereavement, when the dead are brought home to tell their own ghastly tale. It did not, as he thought of this, seem so altogether strange that Mr. Frederick Blissett should prefer to go down to Allgrove by deputy. He had evidently disordered nerves (although he might not be quite so ill as he wished it to be supposed), and so melancholy a visit would upset him. Perhaps, too, his late brother and himself had not been upon the most cordial terms. Or perhaps he and the widow were at variance. This latter supposition seemed likely enough, since the daughter of the dead man, and not herself, had written to apprise the painter of what had happened; and it was to Miss Blissett that the note was addressed, which he had read as he had come along in the Hansom, and now, as he lay back in his corner of the railway carriage, perused again.

'MY DEAR CHRISTIE—Words fail me to write what I feel concerning the terrible misfortune, which (I am sure), has overwhelmed you and your poor mother. Nor, unhappily, can I come down at once, in person, as I naturally desire to do. I am exceedingly unwell, and have been so for several days. The night before last, in particular, though I retired early and rose late—contrary, as you know, to my usual custom—I was seriously ill, and last night not much better, as you will learn from the young gentleman who bears this note. The nature of his position, as my companion and confidential clerk (if I may so term him), will explain how far from well I have been—to have made it necessary to employ such a person. I have been fortunate in finding a youth of such good birth and education (as you will perceive for yourself) to fill the post, and although he has been with me but a short time, I have every confidence in him. Pray ask your good mother to communicate her wishes to him upon all matters wherein it lies in my power to serve her, and he will carry them to me. How egotistic all this must sound to you, whose thoughts are occupied with the memory of a far better man than your poor Uncle Fred ever was, or will be! Alas, alas! How I wish I could comfort you both by word or deed. If I find myself at all equal to the exertion, I shall of course come down to pay the last sad tribute to my dear and lamented brother: of the date, &c., my young friend (Mr. Charles Steen) will of course inform me.—With the deepest sympathy for you and your bereaved mother—to whom, please, remember me with affectionate respect—I am always your loving uncle, FRED BLISSETT.'

As the young man folded this letter up, and placed it in his breast-pocket, he became for the first time fully conscious of the presence of two fellow-passengers, although he had already flown over a mile or two in their company. So rapt he was, however, in reflection upon his patron's letter—which seemed, somehow, to corroborate his suspicions, that Mr. Frederick Blissett and his sister-in-law were not on the best of terms, a circumstance which was likely to render his own mission additionally embarrassing—that perhaps he would not have noticed them even now, had not his attention been drawn to their conversation by the mention by one of them of Allgrove. Yes; certainly the gentleman in the white cravat had stated that he had come from Allgrove that morning. If so, he was probably returning to it. He might then become his fellow-passenger from Chudleigh Station; they might take a conveyance between them, unless, indeed (and the stranger's double eye-glasses *were* set in gold), he should have a private carriage to meet him. Even in that case, however, a divine, as he evidently was, would doubtless be benevolent enough to offer him a lift. In youth we crave for companionship. The past does not yet afford us sufficient food for reflection; and we have not found out that nine chance acquaintances out of ten are mere repetitions of the same type, and dead conversational failures.

'I should not have gone to town at all, if it had not been absolutely necessary,' continued the old gentleman; 'and I am running back again, as you see, in case I can possibly be of any use. That is excuse

enough : but indeed I should not have dreamed of calling upon him.'

'I know he was never a favourite of yours, Mr. Mellish,' said the other gravely, a bluff rubicund gentleman, with very pleasant gray eyes, and a hearty voice, which he seemed to be endeavouring to soften, to suit some sorrowful topic. 'The new squire will be very different from the last.'

'A Satyr to Hyperion, Mr. Lane.'

'I don't know about Hyperion, parson ; but Frank Blissett was just the best fellow I ever met at cover-side ; and as for his successor being a Satyr, I am afraid that is true, for he always had a biting tongue.'

Mr. Mellish's face gave one great twinkle, so that his spectacles looked for an instant like the cover of a cucumber-frame that catches the sun. Then he sighed, as though reproaching himself for having given way to merriment, however short-lived.

'Yes,' said he, 'Mr. Frederick is sharp enough at tongue-fence, and, indeed, a clever fellow altogether. His tricks in India showed that, if they did not do much credit to his morality.'

'Ay ; he was the first to find out how to win a cheroot sweepstakes : that, by dipping your weed in saltpetre, you could keep it alight in a whirlwind.'

'Yes : and then that pice story showed a good deal of ingenuity.—Don't you know it? Well, it was after he had to leave the army on account of money matters, that he got made collector, or some other responsible officer of that kind, in the Civil Service ; his previous conduct recommending him (I suppose) so particularly to the Indian authorities for such a post.

However, he got it. Well, the money intrusted to him had to be sent to Calcutta at considerable intervals of time; and his native clerk being of the same sort of practical turn as his master, used to substitute small coins (pice) for the rupees in the treasury bags, and lend the government-money to his fellow natives—for a good consideration. Mr. Frederick got a hint of this; but, unfortunately, a little late. The inspector had given him notice that he should visit him officially next week. The money was gone, and the collector was answerable. If the clerk had been accused at once, it was certain that not a rupee would be returned. The man would take his punishment, and the native creditors would repudiate the transaction. But his master sent for the clerk, and informed him that henceforward the money would be returned less frequently than usual; only the accounts must be made afresh, to suit the new state of things. "We will go over the rupees on Thursday together," said he. The clerk flies to his creditors, explains how matters stand, and promising more favourable terms in future, gets most of the money back, and borrows the remainder—to be repaid on Friday. The rupees were made all right—though only as the clerk hoped *pro tem*. After they had gone over them together—"Well," said Mr. Frederick, "I am glad that all those pice have been taken away, my friend, which I found here the day before yesterday. But you thoroughly understand the reason why I am obliged for the future to dispense with your valuable services."

'How he enjoyed making that speech, I'll answer for it!' said Mr. Lane, chuckling merrily.

'Ay; and how he squinted, I warrant,' assented Mr. Mellish.

'I suppose this Frederick Blissett gets all the property?' observed Mr. Lane regretfully.

'O yes. It is all entailed upon heirs-male; the consequence is that those dearest and nearest to the deceased are almost penniless. Our savage island custom, Sir.'

'The greatest bulwark of the British constitution, Mr. Mellish, although I deeply regret its working in the present instance. — How much will the poor widow—— Upon my life, I feel like a child when I speak of her. I never shall forget that interview with her yesterday. That damned little Fungus (I beg your pardon, parson) wouldn't see me through it, and you were out, so I had to break the news to her. Not but that directly she saw my face, she knew what had happened. "My Frank is dead!" said she. It was terrible to hear and see her, Sir.' And Mr. Lane executed a flourish of trumpets, by aid of his nose and his pocket handkerchief, in order to conceal his emotion.

'Mrs. Blissett and Christie will have about two hundred pounds a year,' said the clergyman gravely, 'and that cottage by the river to live in.'

'But I hope this fellow will behave like a gentleman to them—will set by a portion of his own——'

'Not he, Sir,' interrupted Mr. Mellish. 'Though, if he made such an offer, mind you, the widow would never accept it. She is an excellent judge of character, and she knows her brother-in-law well: and I know him too. In the first place,'—here the speaker's

voice sank to a whisper, and he looked suspiciously at Charles Steen, who, I am afraid, was counterfeiting sleep (‘not right, but very natural,’ as his patron would have said)—‘in the first place, Frederick Blissett is half mad: he is touched in his upper decks.’

‘What! and he such a clever fellow?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

Madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.

He has all the cunning and malignity of “one distract;” and he is as grasping and malicious (although not mean in little things, like our friend Fungus) as Old Scratch. No; Mrs. Blissett will be spared the embarrassment of refusing any generous arrangements made for her by her brother-in-law, you may take my word for that.’

‘Nay; I shall hope better things of him, than what you tell me, Mellish. His new position may alter his character. He’s been confoundedly hard up, you know, all his life, and that makes a fellow look sharp after the main chance. As the Squire of Morden Hall, he may behave better.’

‘Or will seem to do so, doubtless,’ observed the other drily.

O, what a world of vile ill-favoured faults
Look handsome in three thousand pounds a year!

I have not patience to think of it. Fancy that poor lady in her sad condition turned out of her house, with all its loving memories, to make room for such a successor! Bah! If I was not a clergyman, I could say

it was almost enough to make one disbelieve in a Providence.'

'Yes, indeed,' returned the other, tapping his boot reflectively. 'It's a most awkward thing. I wonder what will be done about the shooting. I dare say, being a painter, he don't know one bird from another flying. The Hunt, too, will lose a good subscription. He'll be made a magistrate of course. Umph! I dare say I shall have trouble enough with him. These interlopers are always questioning decisions, and setting themselves against the chairman.—Holloa, here's Chudleigh! I had no idea we had got so far. You get out here, Mellish, of course?'

'Yes. You will be at Allgrove the day after to-morrow, for the inquest?'

'Certainly: it will be my duty. Although, indeed, the proceedings will be merely nominal.'

'Did you say this was Chudleigh, Sir?' asked Charles Steen, rousing himself with a yawn.

'Yes, indeed; here we are.'

The train slid slowly along the platform as he spoke.

'Can I get any conveyance, do you know, Sir, to take me to Allgrove—to a house called Morden Hall?'

Mr. Mellish, who, unencumbered with luggage, was about to hurry away to where an open carriage with one horse could be seen awaiting him at the station-gate, was arrested at once by these words.

'Morden Hall? You can't go there. Death and mourning are in that house, Sir.'

.. 'I know it. That is why I am sent, Sir.'

'O, I see: the undertaker's man from London;'

muttered the parson peevishly. 'I should have thought she had had more sense than to spend a half-year's income upon such mummary.—Here, Sir, you may take a seat by me, if you have not much luggage, and it isn't ——' He was about to say a 'coffin and ostrich feathers;' but he stopped himself just in time, and added, 'very heavy.'

The portmanteau was put in; the groom, who was also gardener and butler, took his place behind, and off drove the rector with his late companion.

'What house do you represent, Sir?' asked the former sharply, after a long silence.

'I came down to Allgrove on the part of Mr. Frederick Blissett, of Conduit Street.'

'Ah, exactly; I'm glad to hear it. He has taken all these expenses upon his own shoulders, has he? Very proper, very right. But you must wait till after the inquest. It's no use your going to the Hall; indeed, that's out of the question. The body's at the public-house at present.'

For a moment, Charles Steen entertained the suspicion that another body—namely, Mr. Mellish—had been at the public-house but recently; then the true state of the case flashed upon him.

'You mistake my errand,' said he smiling; 'I am the secretary and confidential agent of Mr. Frederick Blissett.'

'The deuce you are!' ejaculated the rector, the recollection of his late conversation with Mr. Lane causing his honest face to bear a sudden glow. 'Why, my friend and I were gossiping about him as we came down in the train. Did you not hear us?'

‘I did hear something of it, Sir, but not enough to justify my interference; besides, I have only known Mr. Blissett a little while myself, and am not in a position—I am sure he would not wish it—to say to two strangers: “You must not express your opinion upon this gentleman in my presence.” If I am wrong I owe him an apology, and you also, Sir.’

‘A very proper observation, Sir,’ said Mr. Mellish, upon whom the good looks and well-chosen speech of the young man were having their effect, notwithstanding his natural prejudice against the envoy of the new squire. I conclude, then, that your—that Mr. Frederick is not himself coming down to Allgrove immediately?’

‘No, Sir. I am charged with a letter to Miss Christina——’

‘Christie,’ interrupted Mr. Mellish. ‘Nobody calls her Christina; even to strangers she is introduced as Miss Christie.’

‘Well, Sir, I have a letter for her to explain that Mr. Frederick Blissett has been ill for some time, and——’

‘He was well enough three days ago,’ broke in Mr. Mellish bluntly. ‘He wrote to his poor brother (as I happen to know) without saying a word about ill health; and the squire wrote back by return of post—yes, the day before yesterday, to ask him to hunt at Newnham, which he would scarcely have done had he known Mr. Frederick to be unwell. However, that of course is not your business—nor, indeed, mine either. Do you see that vast ploughed field, cut in the middle by a straight green road, yonder?’

The rector had stopped the horse, to breathe him, at the top of a long ascent. Before them lay a wide plateau of down, over which the November wind blew very keenly; but on the right hand, whither the speaker was pointing with his whip, there was a hollow—a vast trough, as it were, in the rolling downland, where the plough had sought to take away its reproach from the barren soil.

‘That was the place where your friend’s brother was found dead but yesterday,’ said Mr. Mellish gravely.

Associated with such a catastrophe—for which its bleak and sterile solitariness seemed very fitting—it was not a scene easily forgotten. Charles Steen regarded it long and fixedly. He kept silence for some distance, and his voice was sad, as he presently remarked: ‘From what you, or your friend, let fall in the railway carriage, I understand that this poor gentleman has not left his family well provided for. Let me say for your comfort that in this letter here Mr. Frederick writes to Miss Christie: “Pray, ask your good mother to express her wishes upon any matter wherein it lies in my power to serve her;” and I am bound to say that I have myself experienced most genuine proofs of his generous—and, yes, certainly unselfish—kindness.’

‘I am right glad to hear it, Sir,’ exclaimed the rector. ‘To do good deeds is a certain means of living down a bad reputation. Not, of course,’ added Mr. Mellish with precipitation, ‘that that is the case with your friend and patron; but we country folks like familiar faces, and when one is gone (such a kindly

one, too, as this one was I), we regard that which comes to fill its place with suspicious prejudice. But Mr. Frederick, being such as you represent him, will win his way in time. As for you, it does you credit to speak so well of your benefactor, and we shall be good friends, I see. 'Upon any matter wherein it lies in his power to serve her,' he says, does he? I am glad of that, for Christie's sake, at all events: the widow will surely never stand in Christie's way. Look you here, young gentleman. I am an old man, and a minister (although an unworthy one) of God Almighty. By virtue of my age and office, I may urge upon you, although a stranger, considerations which from another would be impertinent. Be a friend—you who have the ear of your patron—to this widow and orphan, as far as lies in your power. They have suffered a terrible blow, which at present numbs them to the minor trials that are awaiting them—poverty among the rest.'

'You may trust me, Sir. I know what it is to be poor myself.'

'Ay; but you have not had wealth, and lost it.

To be worst,
The lowest and most dejected thing in fortune
Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear;
The lamentable change is from the best.

Do you understand? When we are suffering from the grief of loss, we underrate all other calamities, notwithstanding that they have very bitter stings. If you find these poor women careless of the future, you must take what measures you can for their advantage. God

has given you a great responsibility at a very early age.'

'Alas, Sir, I have no power, no influence with Mr. Blissett whatever. My position with him is of the humblest.'

'No matter : he must see with your eyes, since he is not here to see for himself. Your position is humble, but I am much mistaken if you are not a gentleman.' ('By all means will I gain him,' thought the parson, like another St. Paul.) 'You must promise me to do your best.'

'I do, indeed, Sir.'

'There's a good boy ! Look, yonder is Allgrove—and a precious steep pitch this is that dips down into it ; that winding river is the Rill ; and see that fine place amid the trees, with all the blinds drawn down, because the light and life are gone out of it, that is the house you are bound for—Morden Hall.'





CHAPTER X.

THE HOUSE OF MOURNING.

AT the door of the little white vicarage which opened on the village street—although, behind, it had a pleasant garden extending to the river bank—the parson's sober nag stopped short, and Mr. Mellish had to use his whip-lash, albeit as lightly as though he were whipping a stream instead of a strawberry mare. 'I shall take you on to the house, Mr. Steen, myself,' said he. 'I should have gone there presently, in any case. But as Mr. Frederick's emissary, you might not have the sort of reception which I flatter myself my personal introduction will insure you. If you find the widow—poor soul—a little antagonistic, you must not mind. She always imagined that her husband was not well treated by his younger brother, and at such a time as this, that idea—whether well grounded or not—is sure to be intensified.'

'I see, Sir, and I am very much obliged to you,' answered the young man gloomily. His mission seemed to grow more distasteful as he drew near its

accomplishment. It was evident that he was the representative of one who was far from popular, and what was required of him would demand tact as well as delicacy. It was not to be expected that he should feel a deep regret for the loss of one whom he had never seen, and had only heard of within the last twenty-four hours ; and yet, in this atmosphere of woe, he must be careful to comport himself like others who had a reason for their grief. The woman who opened the lodge-gate to let them through, had eyes red with weeping, and when Mr. Mellish asked after her mistress, burst into tears.

‘She keeps up wonderful, Sir, I believe, considering,’ sobbed she. ‘I should ha’ thought it would ha’ killed her.’

‘God forbid, Martha ! We must all keep up for her sake and Miss Christie’s,’ said the parson kindly.

‘Yes, Sir ; but it’s hard to do’t. O, to think as I shall never open the gate to him again ! He had always a smile and a pleasant word for me, Sir. And I was not up to let him out yesterday morning, Sir. Perhaps his last thought of me was as I was a slugga-bed. There’s his horse’s hoof-marks, look you, yet, Sir,’ and again Martha’s ready tears rained down her cheeks, as the vehicle drove on.

The thaw had continued, and there was a melancholy dripping from the park trees ; the woods were hid in vapour, and even on the comparatively high ground on which the Hall was situated, the evening mist was rising, though it was yet early. The house itself, with its closed shutters, stared at the visitors like one with sightless eyes. No sign of life was to

be seen as they drew up, except a little spaniel, which jumped from the mat on the front-door, and ran to meet them, but upon seeing it was not the master he in vain expected, slouched away in silent disappointment.

‘Poor Scaramouch! He has lost a good friend, like the rest of us,’ said Mr. Mellish with a sigh.

These incidents, and the gloom of the scene about him, were not without their effect upon Charles Steen, whose disposition was singularly sympathetic, even for his time of life. He began to feel a personal interest in the sad fate of one so universally regretted; and his countenance did not belie the mourning suit he wore.

‘How is your missis, Maitland?’ asked Mr. Mellish anxiously, as the butler opened the door.

‘Better than one would expect, Sir,’ said the old servant, shaking his head. ‘She don’t give way to tears much, they tell me.’

‘I am sorry for it,’ said the parson. ‘That’s a bad sign. Has the doctor been?’

‘Mr. Ricketts called, Sir; but my mistress wouldn’t see him.’

‘And Miss Christie?’

‘Miss Christie is wonderful good, Sir; tries to keep up for the sake of her mother; but, O Lord, Sir, it’s a hard matter for all of us.’

‘Now, don’t you be a fool, Maitland,’ said the parson sharply; ‘but take a lesson from your young mistress.—Show this gentleman into the breakfast-parlour, if there’s a fire there, and see about getting a room for him. He will stay here to-night, and probably longer.’

The butler stared.

‘It’s all right,’ said the rector. ‘Mr. Steen here has come down on the part of Mr. Frederick, who is too ill to come in person.’

‘Very good, Sir. Then he can have Mr. Frederick’s room, which was prepared for him, by missis’s orders, the night before last.’

‘That will do, Maitland. You may leave us.—Now, Mr. Steen, you will be good enough to stay here, while I go up stairs and mention your arrival. There are no books, because this was poor Frank’s “study,” and reading was not his forte. But there is a picture to look at, which is large enough to be seen even by this light. It represents Boleslaus, King of Poland, slaying Stanislaus, Bishop of Cracovia, and his only brother, at the high altar, while he was celebrating mass. Not a cheerful subject; but Maitland will bring you candles and something to eat directly, I have no doubt.’ And with that he left the room.

There was no doubt in Charles Steen’s mind as to who was the painter who had executed this work of art: the large size of the figures; the gorgeous colouring, that seemed to mitigate the gathering gloom, would alone have marked it for his patron’s. Nay, as he examined it more intently, there seemed to him a likeness in the truculent monarch’s expression, though not in the features, to that worn by Mr. Frederick Blissett when displeased—the same sort of similitude which he had observed in the same painter’s Lucius Sylla. Was it possible that the artist’s mind was so subjective as to repeat himself in whatever he did; or was a morbid fancy playing him false in the

dim twilight? No. The butler presently came in with lighted candles, closed the shutters, drew the curtains, and made all snug; but the likeness of King Boleslaus to Mr. Frederick Blissett remained even more obvious. Was it possible that those vindictive eyes were just a hairbreadth too near together? Did his majesty of Poland squint? If the test of a good portrait, as some say, lies in the eyes following the spectator about the room, that of this royal assassin certainly fulfilled it, for they pursued Charles Steen with such malicious persistence, that at last he drew a chair to the fire, and sat down with his back to them.

With his elbows on his knees, and his head in his hands, he sat plunged in thought, reviewing the scanty yet not uneventful past till he was suddenly roused by a hand laid upon his shoulder, and in his ear a manly voice, with gentle pathos in it, saying: 'Charles Steen, this is Miss Christie, the niece of Mr. Frederick Blissett.'

The young man started up and bowed.

Christie, pale, worn with weeping, and still more with efforts not to weep, attired in some old black garments which she chanced to have by her, made for her long ago, stood by his side, the very impersonation as it seemed to him of youth and woe and beauty.

'You are come to a mournful house, Sir; but you are welcome.'

'I am grieved, indeed, Miss Blissett, that it is so: a stranger's sympathy is valueless in so sad a case. Let me say, however, that my mission is, if possible, to mitigate a calamity that nothing can cure. Your uncle bade me say——'

The look of the young girl was

so distraught with wretchedness, that the ambassador's words failed him for very pity. 'Here is the letter he intrusted to me to give you,' was all that he could say.

'Whatever is written, he has, I am sure, chosen a kind messenger,' said she gratefully.

'You had better read it, Christie,' remarked Mr. Mellish significantly, 'before taking it up stairs.'

While she did so, the parson spoke to Steen in a low voice. 'You are going up to see Mrs. Blissett. She insists upon it. You must be very patient with her—gentle, of course, you will be—and while performing your duty to him who sends you, do it with discretion.—What do you think, Christie?'

The young girl was turning the note about with her hands, in evident perplexity.

'Do *you* read it, Mr. Mellish, and advise me.'

'Even while asking for advice, the expression of her face was singularly discreet and thoughtful: the change that had come over those youthful features within the last eight-and-forty hours, was such as it commonly takes years to effect. Not only had the buoyancy of the child disappeared for ever, but the bashful timidity, the demure shyness of the maiden, seemed to have been overleaped; a matronly discretion had suddenly lit upon those youthful brows, and settled there. Nor did Christie look even in years nearly so young as when we saw her last.

'I think, Mr. Steen had better see your mother, since she seems to desire it, Christie,' said Mr. Mellish, returning her the note without any observation.

'Mr. Steen has as yet had no refreshment,' said the

young lady doubtfully. 'While he takes some, had I not better go to mamma and read the note?'

'I think not, Christie,' was the rector's quiet reply.

'Pray, do not consider me, I beg, Miss Blissett,' said Charles Steen, who, unused to the downs' air, was, in truth, getting well-nigh ravenous.

'I will take my dinner with him when he comes down,' put in Mr. Mellish: 'if he appreciates good company, that will more than atone for the delay.'

Though mirth in the house of woe is misplaced, the thing called cheerfulness—at other times rather the reverse of exhilarating—is generally grateful. Mr. Mellish was well used to visit the homes of affliction; and, indeed, like his favourite author, he had studied human nature under most aspects. Mr. Frederick Blissett's letter had made a no more pleasing impression on him than it had on Christie; but he trusted that its bearer's good looks and gentle manners would prove their own passport with the widow, nevertheless.

'Will you please to follow me, Mr. Steen?' said Christie; and she led the way through the hall, with its crossed fox-brushes on the wall, and the large hunting-map, with the poor squire's favourite meets marked in red ink, and up those stairs which were never more to creak beneath his tread.

'This is mamma's room; she is a sad invalid,' said she, in half-apologetic, half-appealing tones, as she ushered him into the boudoir which we have already seen. It was well lit. Mrs. Blissett was lying, as before, upon the spring-couch, which was in the daytime a sofa. She was in deep black, and already she wore a widow's cap, which framed a face more pinched and

worn than ever. Her eyes were very homes of woe, but showed no trace of tears.

‘You come from Mr. Frederick Blissett, Sir?’ said she, signing to the young man, almost imperiously, to remain where he was.

‘I do, Madam.’

‘Do you know him well?’

‘I have only known him a very short time, Madam.’

‘And yet you are his confidential friend, it seems?’

The voice, though low, was distinct and steady. The fragile hand that held the note, as yet unread, which her daughter had placed in it, trembled not at all. His reception was altogether different from what the youth had expected, but it set him comparatively at ease; and yet he was well aware that beneath this resolute bearing there lay an unutterable wretchedness; nay, he felt dimly conscious that this poor woman regarded him not only as a stranger, who might not intermeddle with her woe, but as an enemy, to whom it were sacrilege to evince it.

‘I am in too humble a position to be Mr. Frederick Blissett’s friend, Madam,’ said he modestly. ‘I am his companion and assistant only; but being himself unwell, he has chosen me as his agent in this matter. He bade me say, with reference to the cruel calamity——’

Christie touched his arm lightly with her fingers. A spasm seemed to distort her mother’s face; but she opened the letter when he ceased, and read it through without a sign of emotion.

‘Your patron’s illness seems to have been very

sudden, Sir. A letter from him arrived here but three days since, in which he makes no mention of it.'

'I believe it *was* sudden, Madam. I was not with him at the time you mention ; but I can answer for it, of my own personal knowledge, that he was very unwell last night. It was no mere excuse.'

'I did not say it was, Sir. He has no cause to make such. He is master here now, to come or stay as he pleases.' The widow's words dropped from her lips as hard and sharp as nails, and the bitterness of gall seemed to lie in her tones, as she added : 'There is not much in this letter, Mr. Steen. I conclude you are in this gentleman's confidence. May I ask if you have any orders to communicate to us ?'

'Orders, Madam ? Indeed, if I had such to give, he must have chosen another messenger. I know him, as I have said, but little, yet I am bound to tell you that he again and again begged me to assure you of his wish to serve you ; of his desire to grant any request of yours.'

Christie stooped down, and whispered something into her mother's ear.

'Forgive me, Mr. Steen,' said the widow in a changed voice ; 'forgive a broken-hearted crippled creature, whom God has seen good to deprive of her sole stay and comfort—— Yes,' added she in reply to her daughter's glance of loving remonstrance, 'so it seems, my Christie, darling.—I see, Sir, I have wronged you.'

'God help you, Madam, and comfort you,' said the young man earnestly. 'I, who have no friend in all the world, may, for myself, say so much as that since

I am forbidden to speak for another. But I do trust you will suffer Mr. Blissett to be of some service—that you will permit me to name to him some one thing at least which it may lie in his power to do.’

‘He has already placed us under an obligation, by sending in his place a young gentleman with so good a heart,’ said the widow gravely.

‘I can scarcely write him *that*, dear Madam,’ persisted Steen.

‘Ah, yes, you must write him something—true.’ The widow’s features seemed to stiffen into stone; then she looked at her daughter, and they relaxed again. ‘For myself, Sir, I need nothing; I have nothing to ask.’

‘Forgive me, dear Madam, if I say that it was for your sake—for you especially—that Mr. Blissett seemed anxious to be of service. He thought, probably, that his readiness to do his best for your daughter—his own flesh and blood—might be taken for granted.’

‘He wished to please *me*, did he? *Me?*’ said the widow slowly. ‘Well, that lies in his power. It is very simple. He asks there’—she pointed to the letter, which she had let fall on the couch beside her as soon as read—‘a question about the fu—the day—’

‘He does, Madam,’ interrupted Steen, seeing that the poor lady scarcely could speak.

‘Tell him’—her voice became here once more clear again, and as she proceeded, hard even to harshness—‘tell Mr. Frederick Blissett, that the only favour his sister-in-law has to ask of him for herself is this—that he will *not* come to the funeral of his dead brother.’

‘That, since my uncle is so far from well,’ put in Christie gently, ‘dear mamma means that we would not wish him to take the journey ; but that we thank him for his offer to do so, and for the other kind expressions in his note.’

‘Tell him what you will, Sir,’ continued the widow, feebly endeavouring to raise herself on the couch, ‘so long as you tell him not to come. Let no——’

Christie motioned with her hand that Steen should leave the room ; but before he could obey her, he caught, in excited accents, the words : ‘Let no false alloy mingle with our woe—no hypocrite’s tears——’

‘You must forget this, Mr. Steen,’ whispered Christie with earnestness, as they stood together outside the door.

‘I remember nothing, Miss Blissett,’ returned the young man respectfully, ‘except that your poor mother is sore afflicted both in body and mind.’





CHAPTER XI.

A TETE-A-TETE WITH MR. MELLISH.

THE gift of good looks is of such primary advantage to every man, that it seems a wonder how ugly people manage so frequently to excel those who have it, in the battle of life. To many, however, fortunately for the ill-looking, its very possession is like that of inherited wealth, and cripples exertion ; with the stream and tide of the world's favour so clearly with them, they flatter themselves that they can rest upon their oars, and drift to Fortune. And when to good looks are added pleasant manners and kindly ways, the Young at least can really almost afford to do this. Mr. Frederick Blissett, whether mad, as the rector had hinted, or not, had certainly the brains to apprehend what sober common sense would never have hit upon, when he sent down Charles Steen as his envoy to Morden Hall. There were reasons which made it no disadvantage, but rather the contrary, that the young man was almost a total stranger to him ; ignorant of his past, and especially of its relation to his deceased brother : and he calculated, justly, upon his ambassador's making an

agreeable impression, with a favourable reflex action upon himself. If we have failed to do Mr. Charles Steen justice in our description of him, our shortcoming in that respect may be excused, since the attractiveness of look and manner is just what words can never describe ; but he possessed it in perfection. It is probable that even Mrs. Mangoe would have favoured him, if he had not chanced to have been adopted by her husband ; that Mr. Curtis, porter and deputy-master of the Refuge, was prejudiced against him, was a tribute to his powers of pleasing, for a brutal and sullen nature is as antagonistic to its contrary as vice to virtue. At Morden Hall, where hearts were set wide by affliction, and made sensitive to delicate condolence—unintrusive sympathy—Charles Steen, first admitted as a doubtful friend (and only in that semi-favourable position, through the rector's good report of him), was soon welcomed on his own account as a genuine well-wisher. The servants liked him (though we don't know how this would have been if they had known he had so lately partaken of the hospitalities of Mr. Curtis) for his gracious behaviour and carefulness to avoid giving trouble ; and if the mistress of the house could not bring herself to spare his patron, she had sufficiently showed that her animosity did not extend to his messenger ; while her very displeasure had caused, as we have seen, a sort of confidential relation to be established between Miss Christie and himself. This last circumstance did not, we may be sure, weaken that resolve, which his own nature had suggested, to do the widow and her daughter as much good service with his patron as he could effect. He

wrote Mr. Blissett a few lines by post on the evening of his arrival, which, while conveying the facts, placed them in the light which he thought most likely to be favourable to the interests of his hostess. He assured him that she would by no means take it ill if he should not feel sufficiently recovered from his indisposition to attend the funeral in person; but, on the contrary, that she seemed averse to his incurring any risk in so doing; and that he had himself been permitted to see Mrs. Blissett, he ascribed solely to her respect for her brother-in-law: 'Even if you were to come,' he wrote, 'I doubt whether she would feel herself equal to an interview; for, as you will easily understand, it was (as much, perhaps, as her esteem for yourself) the very fact of my being a stranger, unknown to her late husband, and in no way associated with his memory, which made my presence endurable; and even as it was, the poor lady was scarcely mistress of herself.' He was reticent in his account of Mr. Mellish, rightly judging that any praise of him would be unacceptable to his correspondent, and having nothing to communicate to his discredit. The day fixed for the funeral he did not mention, lest, by some evil chance, Mr. Blissett should come down after all; but the postscript stated that the inquest was to be held on the next day but one. In short, if our diplomatists were born, instead of being made out of the younger branches of noble families, Mr. Charles Steen showed promise of becoming one day addressed as His Excellency.

On the night of his arrival at Allgrove, he dined, as we have seen, with Mr. Mellish at the Hall; but the next day he was his guest at the rectory. The good

parson took compassion upon the young fellow—a stranger in that house of mourning, and of course condemned to a solitary table, the widow and her daughter taking their joyless meals together—if, indeed, the former ate at all—up stairs. Miss Christie, while wearing that white woe upon her face, which is the deepest mourning human features can put on, was yet not neglectful of her mother's guest. The offices of hospitality were paid by her, as it seemed to the recipient, with an unequalled grace. Twice during the next day she saw him, and each time bore some kind though trivial message from the widow.

'I am ashamed to think,' said the young man modestly, 'that my involuntary presence here should be even remembered by her at such a time.'

'Nay, Mr. Steen, it is good for her just now,' returned Christie simply. 'She reproaches herself with having behaved with seeming harshness towards you yesterday (although I told her you thought nothing of it), after you had said you had not a friend in the world. Moreover (and chiefly), dear papa' (her sad eyes swimming in tears) 'was hospitality itself, and my mother would not have that virtue die with him.'

That was almost the sole direct allusion which Christie made to her father in the young man's hearing; but all other tongues in the household, and even in the village, talked of him almost unceasingly. Knots of people hung about the little inn, where the body lay, conversing about him in hushed tones. Any stranger, who, riding through the place, drew rein at the door of the *Rising Sun*, was sure to have the accident described to him. The first salutation of one

from some neighbouring hamlet, when he reached Allgrove and met an inhabitant, was : ' Well, this is a sad business indeed about the squire ; ' and the inquest itself was a subject of which the villagers never tired. The young stranger at the Hall gave rise to not a few surmises. Some of that large class to whom the only intelligible topics of talk are Death and Marriage, would have it that he was Miss Christie's accepted lover—they had deemed her but a child last week—come to comfort the family in their calamity by his presence ; but the majority understood that he was in some way connected with the squire's brother and heir-at-law. It was no discredit to their sagacity that they could not realise his position, since he did not fully comprehend it himself ; but their guesses were wide enough of the mark. One unflattering suggestion was, that he was a sort of man in possession, sent down to see that the widow did not carry off anything belonging to the new proprietor. Perhaps it was natural at such a season that the successor of Frank Blissett should not be popular ; but certainly the universal opinion was dead against him. Mr. Frederick was ' one of them London chaps ; ' he was ' a wild Indian '—this was a composite verdict, a condemnation of his moral qualities, associated with an ethnological mistake—he was ' little better than a heathen.' There were two (excellent) reasons for this last assertion—first, the good folks at Allgrove, though totally ignorant of theological dogma, were great sticklers for it, and Mr. Frederick, during his unfrequent visits at the Hall, had offended public opinion by absenting himself from church ; secondly, his profession as a painter seemed

to some (although they did not openly confess it) as a breach of the second commandment.

The rector (though he had expressed his own views so freely to Mr. Lane, his equal) strove, as in duty bound, to combat this prejudice in the parish against the man who, whatever were his shortcomings, was now the squire of Allgrove. His mode of defence was characteristic, but not always successful. He would make some apt quotation from Shakspeare, to which the rustic mind generally succumbed, uncertain whether the injunction did not proceed from Holy Writ; or he would produce some far-fetched historical example of those who, being unexpectedly called to greatness, have disappointed the forebodings of their detractors.

‘There was Nicholas West,’ explained he to Mr. Groves, the principal tenant on the Morden estate, and who, having known Mr. Frederick Blissett from his youth up, so far as his days had been passed at Allgrove, had not formed any high expectations of him as a man and a landlord—‘There was Nicholas West, we must remember, whose life at college was so lawless that he even set fire to the master’s lodge, and yet who afterwards became Bishop of Ely, and one of the most exemplary of prelates.’

‘Well, Sir,’ answered Mr. Groves, scratching his head, ‘I don’t say as Mr. Frederick ever set fire to the master’s lodge’ (meaning the gatekeeper’s cottage), ‘though I do think he would ha’ been equal to that, if he had been much crossed; but as long as he lives—and you may take my word for it—he’ll never be Bishop of Ely; no, nor of anywheres else.’

The rector, unselfish in his pleasures, yet, having no (appreciative) ear in Allgrove to which to confide this admirable rejoinder, related it to his young guest at dinner ; and that conversation once turned upon the new squire's character, continued to flow in that channel—not, however, be it understood, to Mr. Frederick Blissett's discredit. Charles Steen, although silent in the railway carriage, had too much good feeling to have permitted any depreciation of his patron at any man's table, even if his host had had the ill taste to indulge in it. But, indeed, Mr. Mellish sought to offer excuses for the painter, rather than to condemn him. Frederick Blissett had been the darling of his mother, who had done her best to spoil him from the cradle, and, as generally happens, had only too well succeeded. She had exaggerated his talents, flattered his egotism, and, what was worse, had always expressed her abhorrence of the injustice of that law of entail which gave his elder brother so much, while it left him so little. His father devised the estate, as country gentlemen often do, to his eldest son and his heirs-male. Thus, now Frank was dead, Frederick succeeded ; nor would one acre revert to poor Miss Christie, unless her uncle died without a son, in which case the property would return to the female branch. Thus, the will that seemed to the late Mrs. Blissett to perpetrate an injustice upon Frederick, had in the end benefited the younger at the expense of the only child of the elder.

With respect to the past, at the late Mrs. Blissett's death, which occurred after that of her husband, Frederick inherited her little fortune, most of which,

however; he had already anticipated. He had chosen for his profession military life in India, in a sudden fit of pique or passion with his Brother Frank (who was sincerely sorry that his only relative should thus self-exile himself), and in a regiment notoriously fast, was known as the most extravagant of subalterns. The climate and his mode of life combined shattered his health as well as emptied his purse. His Brother Frank's offers of pecuniary aid were at that time rejected, and Frederick had to leave the army. Then he contrived to obtain some appointment in the Civil Service, which, in its turn, he also had to relinquish. At last, he came home, and took up with painting, an art to which he had been always greatly devoted; and a reconciliation having been effected between the brothers, the purse-strings of the squire were opened widely to assist him.

'His paintings are very striking,' observed Steen; 'at least, they seem to me so, though I know nothing about such matters.'

'They *are* striking,' assented the rector readily. 'Though we cannot say

His pencilled figures are
Even such as they give out;

for they represent giants, and not men; yet his conceptions are really fine. He has real genius, if it be somewhat morbid.'

'The colouring is marvellous.'

'Well, yes, my dear young Sir; but I am not sure that that is high praise. You should have seen the

charcoal sketches—they are still on the old nursery walls, by-the-bye—which he made when he was quite a lad.’

‘He sketches still in that way, Sir, but in chalks mostly.’

‘He can sketch with anything, Mr. Steen, even with a hot poker. See here.’ The rector drew forth from a cupboard in his parlour a large board, as broad as an inn sign. The picture on it was but burned in, as he described, yet it represented with amazing vigour and rude force the Furies with their hair

Of intertwisted fibres, serpentine,
Upcoiling and inveterately convolved.

‘This he gave to me before he went to India ; and when I told him it was far too large for my little house, he said : “ Hang it up in the church, then.” A nice subject for an altar-piece, upon my word ! The fact is, Mr. Steen—as you might have overheard me say to Mr. Lane yesterday, as we came down in the train—there was always a screw loose in Master Frederick. His art and wit were both perverse ; and the suns and the brandy pawnee of India did not go to cure him. We must all, therefore, make allowances for him as much as we can. Now, there is one question I wish to ask you, which, of course, you need not answer unless you like, and will not, if it involves any breach of confidence. Have you heard Mr. Blissett say anything about his sister-in-law’s future—whether he intends to do anything for her, I mean, in a pecuniary way ?’

‘He expressed a particular wish to be of assistance to her; and as to Miss Christie: “I am naturally zealous on her account,” he said, “being her uncle.”’

‘A little more than kin, and less than kind,’ murmured the rector under his breath. ‘Ah,’ said he coldly, ‘he did not hint at any annual allowance, then?’

‘No, he did not.’

‘Nor as to when they will have to move into the cottage yonder?’ He pointed over his shoulder to indicate Rill Bank, the garden of which sloped down to the river, next to his own. ‘Well, I wish you would procure that information from him, as I, being Mrs. Blissett’s trustee, shall have to arrange with its present tenant, in case they have to remove at once. You may say that I put the question, if you please.—Must you go? What! at nine o’clock? Ah, they keep early hours at the Hall now, of course. Dear, dear! I remember when that used to be the most difficult house to get away from in the county. “Why not all sleep here?” used to be the squire’s cry. And in the old times, many a guest remained who only came to dine. Since poor Mrs. Blissett’s misfortune, Frank’s parties broke up at ten, lest her nights should be disturbed. I wish, for her sake, that to-morrow were past, and the next day also, when he is to be put in his grave.’

They were standing at the rectory door in the village street. Early as it then was, no one was abroad; nothing was heard but the sighing of the wintry wind among the naked trees, and the creaking of the inn sign in its iron frame.

‘God bless you!’ said Mr. Mellish fervently, as he bade his guest good-bye. ‘I fear I am not a very cheerful host just now; but still I hope you will come here again to-morrow. The Hall will then have that substantial sorrow in it, which to the young is so oppressive. And remember, I shall be glad to see you whenever you like.’

Charles thanked the rector warmly, but he little guessed how soon he was fated to take advantage of his invitation.





CHAPTER XII.

THE RECTOR AND THE DOCTOR.

WHEN Charles Steen came down to his solitary breakfast next morning, laid, as usual, under the evil eye of King Boleslaus, he found a letter from his patron awaiting him.

‘MY DEAR SIR,’ it ran,—‘Perhaps, after all, I have been too hasty. Upon reflection, indeed, I am satisfied such is the case ; and the more so since there can be but one decision arrived at by the jury. Just telegraph A. D. (for “Accidental Death”), when they have so pronounced upon it.—The weather here is wretched.

‘Yours,
‘FRED BLISSETT.’

It was a fancy of the painter’s, even when corresponding with comparative strangers, to sign his Christian name thus abbreviated, although nobody, save the late squire, ever called him Fred. With Christie herself,

he was always Uncle Frederick in full. But it was not the signature of the letter which awakened Charles Steen's astonishment; its contents left no room for wonder at anything but them. Was he dreaming? Did he read aright? Or had that eccentricity in his patron's character, to which Mr. Mellish had referred last night, developed suddenly into downright madness? Fearing lest Miss Christie should presently come down, and question him as to whether he had heard from her uncle, and feeling really in great need of counsel, the young man thrust the letter in his pocket, and hurried down through the November drizzle to the rectory. It was rather late in the morning, but Mr. Mellish had not yet risen from the breakfast table. It was the good parson's wont to burn the midnight oil, and save the morning sun; and, besides, on this particular occasion he had a guest with him—a strange-looking little old gentleman, in decidedly old-fashioned clothes, who was introduced to Charles as Dr. Fungus.

'We are very glad to see you, young gentleman,' observed this individual, nodding at him with much familiarity. "'Two are company, and three are none,'" says the proverb; but if the two are *bad* company, and are quarrelling like Kilkenny cats, the third is a relief; and that's just our case.'

As Mr. Mellish smiled grimly, but made no attempt to controvert this statement, it seemed to be a correct one.

'Nothing the matter at the Hall, I hope, Mr. Steen?—that is, more than has already happened, which one would think is woe sufficient,' observed

the rector, with a glance of indignation at his other visitor.

‘No, Sir, nothing at the Hall; but I have had a letter this morning, which I should like you to see presently.’

‘I am off!’ cried Dr. Fungus, seizing a large white hat with a blue lining, and clapping it violently on his head.

‘There is no hurry, Sir,’ said the young man earnestly; ‘my business, although private, is not pressing. Pray, do not let me disturb you.’

‘You don’t disturb me, Sir; you delight me,’ was the doctor’s reply; ‘for you give me an excuse to get away.—Good-morning, Mr. Mellish.’

‘Good-morning, Dr. Fungus, and I hope you will reconsider that matter.’

‘The more I think about it, Sir, the more am I determined to do as I have stated.’

‘Then don’t think about it: act mechanically,’ returned the parson drily.—‘Good-morning, Sir.’

‘I don’t leave this house without my umbrella, Mr. Rector—a large blue umbrella, with a metal handle.’

‘O, there’s no mistaking it, Sir. It’s in the kitchen drying.’ And the rector left the room to call down the back-stairs, at the top of a very unconciliatory voice, for the article in question.

‘Did you hear what he muttered—that reverend gentleman?’ observed the doctor, grinning maliciously. ‘He muttered: “Damn your umbrella.” I heard him. He wanted to keep it for tithe, I’ll warrant.’

‘Here is your valuable property,’ said the rector reappearing.

'It has been scorched by your fire, Mr. Mellish,' replied the other, examining it attentively. 'And it won't go up, Sir.—Yes, it will.'

And it went up with a dreadful sound. Large as the national standard, even when furled, the blue umbrella when put up was something enormous; it resembled the enchanted helmet in the Castle of Otranto, and occupied half the space in the little room. The doctor seemed encamped under it, rather than in a place of temporary shelter.

'Your infernal cook has injured it, Sir—it will not come down,' exclaimed that gentleman, irritated by several unsuccessful attempts to furl it.

'My infernal cook! I will not endure such language in my house, Dr. Fungus.'

'Language! Well, that's very fine, when I just now heard you muttering: "Damn your umbrella!"'

'You'll hear me say it out loud,' retorted the rector angrily, 'if you don't take yourself off.'

Imagine the rector, with his face purple with indignation, holding the door wide open for his guest's egress, while the little doctor strained at the slide of that gigantic umbrella, which would no more come down than a balloon whose valve is fast.

The involuntary witness of this admirable scene, threw himself on the sofa, and fairly roared with laughter; nor was his merriment decreased, when suddenly, with a convulsive click, the umbrella collapsed, and, blinded in its folds, its proprietor rushed headlong into the lobby like a steam-ram. It was not till some time after the front-door had slammed, and the cottage ceased vibrating with the concussion thereof,

that the young fellow could articulate a few words of apology.

'I am glad you were amused,' said the rector savagely, cutting him short. 'Did you ever see such a pig-headed—— But there; I forget: you know nothing about it, else you would see it was no laughing matter!'

'O Sir, but his umbrella!' pleaded the young man, once more relapsing into extravagant mirth.

'Damn his umbrella,' exclaimed the rector fervently: 'it's as obstinate—yes, and as difficult to shut up—as himself.—I hope I didn't lose my temper, Mr. Steen—did I?' added he in more subdued tones, 'or seem to forget that I was his host in any way? But I confess I *was* put out. However, I need not trouble you with that matter.—Now, what about this letter? It's from Mr. Frederick, I suppose? Just so.' And he read it. 'Well, where's the other letter?'

'The other letter?'

'Of course. This is No. 2, although he has not marked it so. "Too hasty," means he replied to your letter at once, without reflection, and dropped it in the post. A thing you should never do, my young friend, till nearly post-time. *Litera scripta manet*. You can't get it out again. He must have got your letter, or how could he have known about the inquest?'

'Just so, Sir. I see. But what can possibly have become of the first letter?'

'Possibly become? My good Sir, it is almost certain we shall find it at the post-office. If you get one out of two letters in Allgrove at the proper time, that is an excellent average. You may have observed

that our walking postman here is lame ; well, that is not the worst of him : he is not good at deciphering manuscript—in fact, I don't believe he can read. But the dear squire *would* appoint him, and I am sure no one will have the heart to remove him now—at least, no one hereabouts.' And the rector regarded the new lord of Allgrove's missive with a little sigh.

'But the other letter, Sir? I *must* get it!'

'True ; we must look after No. 1, Mr. Steen ; though that was a gospel poor Frank Blissett would never listen to. We shall have it all right. Whenever there is a letter over, which our Mercury can make nothing of, he brings it here. I am his Layard—his decipherer of hieroglyphics—and see, here he comes, limping up the road. It is only right that a postman should be always halting.' Mr. Mellish threw up the window.—'Well, George, hast any letter for me?'

'Yes, Sir ; leastways, if it aint for you, I don't know what body it be for.'

'All right, George ; it is for this house.—See, Mr. Steen, I think our royal mail may stand excused before such a scrawl as this.'

And indeed the superscription of Mr. Frederick's letter was very difficult to make out, and evidently dashed off at speed, if not in passion.

The young man broke the seal and read as follows :

'The news you send me, Mr. Steen, is unaccountable, incomprehensible ! An inquest to be held on my poor brother ! Surely you must have been misinformed. Such disrespect can surely never be paid

to our family as such a course would imply. I put myself out of the question (although even I have some right to complain), but imagine the distress of the widow! Is there no possible means of putting a stop to it? There is nothing I detest so much as a morbid publicity; and as the head of the family, I wish that expression of opinion to be conveyed *at once* to the proper authorities.

‘Yours, in haste,

‘FRED BLISSETT.’

‘Having shown you the conclusion of the story, Mr. Mellish, there can be no harm in letting you see the beginning,’ remarked Charles, handing the note to the rector. ‘I suppose it is too late to avoid the inquest now?’

Mr. Mellish’s face was troubled as he replied: ‘Yes, indeed; even if it were possible at any time.’

‘But then,’ added Steen interrogatively, ‘the proceedings will be only a matter of form?’

‘Well, I am afraid not altogether *that*,’ said the rector frankly: ‘the fact is, it was about this very matter that Fungus and I fell out this morning, and this letter of Mr. Frederick’s makes the matter ten times worse. The inquest was absolutely necessary—it is the law of the land; but then, as is here hinted, the verdict might be reasonably anticipated, namely that of accidental death. And so it will be—as it ought to be—unless that little Fungus, who has certainly a maggot in his brain, should make himself obnoxious, which it unhappily lies in his power to do. He is one of the principal witnesses—the second man

that saw the poor squire after his accident, and he has taken it into his head that there may have been foul play. Nothing can be more preposterous and out of the question — but perhaps the notion recommends itself to him on that very account.'

'There was nothing valuable missing from poor Mr. Blissett, I understand?' observed Charles. 'His watch and money were all safe?'

'Of course they were. And I will answer for it the squire had not an enemy in the world; nay, not a person to whom his death—if it were felt at all—would not be felt as a loss. I hope and believe that Mr. Frederick will turn out far better than is expected of him; but still his brother might have made the same remark to him that Charles II. made to the Duke of York, when requested to take more care of his sacred person: "Oddsfish, man, my life is safe enough, for nobody would put an end to it to put you in my place." No, no. Jack Frost is alone to blame for that sad business. The squire pitched on his head on the hard ground, and so we all lost a friend.'

'Mr. Blissett will take it very ill, I fear,' mused Charles, 'if any other conclusion is come to than that which he mentions here.'

'Of course he will, and naturally enough; and what is of much more consequence, the poor widow will be sure to take it to heart. Mr. Lane, my fellow-traveller in the railway carriage the other day, who will be the third material witness this morning, is as anxious as myself that all should go smoothly. He is very indignant with the doctor, and so will be all the county. Fungus will be put in Coventry, as sure as he lives, if

he proves obstinate ; he'll be left alone with his blue umbrella, Sir.—It's eleven o'clock, and the inquiry has already commenced : we shall know all about it in a few hours. They wanted to summon me—as the last person who saw him alive in Allgrove ; he waved his hand to me, and smiled and nodded in his old genial fashion, as I was shaving that morning. But fortunately (for it would have been very sad work) there was another man who saw him later, so I was held excused.—There, that's the fellow just coming out of the inn-door—Jem Templar, who lives up at the Druid Ring, which I shall hope to take you to see some day. He was first called, no doubt, and has given his evidence already.—Holloa ! there's Ricketts too—our doctor ; perhaps he knows how matters are going.' Once more Mr. Mellish threw up the window, or rather threw it back, for it was an old-fashioned latticed frame, which opened door-wise, and was almost as much the channel of communication between the rector and his parishioners as the door itself. In summer weather, he often sat at it, exchanging remarks with the passers-by of all sorts, notwithstanding that its opposite casement opened on the garden, and had a much pleasanter look-out ; the good parson was very human in his sympathies, and perhaps also he did not very much care for

The river's wooded reach,

or the beauties of nature generally.

'Hi ! Mr. Ricketts !' cried he, beckoning with head and hand ; 'one word with you if you please.'

Mr. Ricketts came : a young man, not very scien-

tific-looking as yet, but with a praiseworthy intention of becoming so. He practised pursing the lips and shaking the head, and identified himself with his patients as much as possible by speaking of them in the first person plural. 'We feel better this morning, do we not? Yes, our physic has done us good;' and so on.

'Well, Sir, what are they doing up there? It is a very straightforward case, I suppose—the poor squire's?'

'In my opinion, quite straightforward, Sir. The cause of death, as I have just been testifying, was from the injury to the brain; the blow—that is the fall—on the occiput was so violent as to shatter the parietal bones—so-called, Mr. Mellish, as your classical knowledge will suggest——'

'Yes, yes—a wall, a wall!' exclaimed the rector impatiently. 'I don't care about all that. Is there any difference of opinion about the matter—that's what I wish to know?'

Mr. Ricketts gave a professional shrug, calculated to produce every confidence in a beholder, had not youth and vigour given so much rapidity to the movement as to assimilate it to an acrobatic display.

'Dr. Fungus holds, it seems, another view, Mr. Mellish; and being a learned physician, and I only a poor general practitioner, I dare say it will have more weight with the jury.'

'You don't mean to tell me,' cried the rector excitedly, 'that that old fool is going to persuade them to return a verdict of Wilful Murder?'

'Well, no, Sir—certainly not that. But I should not

be surprised if they gave an open verdict—I should not indeed, Sir.’

‘Umph!’ said the rector discontentedly. Then as though wishing to dismiss from his mind a disagreeable subject, he introduced the two young men. ‘Mr. Ricketts, our doctor; Mr. Charles Steen, friend of Mr. Frederick Blissett’s.’

‘Indeed, Sir. Most proud,’ said the surgeon. ‘Mr. Blissett is well, I hope?—Not at all well? Dear me.’ His hands beginning to revolve slowly as the prospect of an extension of practice dawned upon him. ‘He has long lived a town-life, I understand. When he comes down here, Allgrove air will set him up, I trust.’

‘Our last squire did not patronise the doctor much,’ observed the rector. ‘I suppose that this dreadful *post-mortem* business is the only one wherein— Ah, to be sure, though, he had gout; but for many years past, he used to prescribe for himself for that.’

‘Ah, a great mistake that, Sir—a sad mistake indeed;’ and Mr. Ricketts for the first time evinced a genuine melancholy, and evidently meant what he said. He was proceeding to show that as every man who is his own lawyer has a fool for his client, so every one who doctors himself, or even keeps a medicine-chest, in place of being supplied by the general practitioner in the usual way, does both a foolish and a dangerous thing, when suddenly from the door of the *Rising Sun*, there streamed forth some half-a-dozen gentlemen, and ‘Look, look! the inquest is over,’ cried the rector, and hastily leaving the room, he

snatched up his hat, and hurried into the street. As he did so, Charles noticed the knot of persons in front of the door cease their animated talk, and draw back to left and right, while some individual emerged from it. He wore a broad-brimmed white hat, and carried an enormous umbrella, under which, like one in a religious procession, he slowly moved away amid a profound silence.

'There goes old Fungus,' was Mr. Ricketts's irreverent remark: 'and you may take my word for it, Mr. Steen, that he has put their backs up.'





CHAPTER XIII.

THE CHARGE LAID UPON CHARLES STEEN.

RUMOUR, at all times fleet of foot, in these days rivals Thought itself for speed. The open verdict returned by the wise men of Allgrove sped on horseback to Chudleigh station, and flashed along the wires to Clifford Street, within the hour.

On horseback too, by gig and afoot, it went forth that afternoon throughout the county, while in the village itself there was nought else but it bandied from mouth to mouth. In Morden Hall alone, whither was brought that afternoon the unconscious cause of all this babblement, there was nothing said of the verdict above the breath. It was deemed right that the widow and her daughter should not be told that, in the opinion of twelve of their neighbours—or at least of a majority of that number—it was, however improbable, within the range of possibility that the squire had not come to his end by fair means.

It was understood that this decision had been ar-

rived at solely through the evidence of crotchety Dr. Fungus; and that gentleman—notwithstanding the highly flavoured dish of gossip which he had thus afforded to a most appreciative public—was consequently looked upon with great disfavour. He was staying for the time with Farmer Groves, whose sister (dead these twenty years) he had married in middle life; and even his host and brother-in-law, it was said, had expressed himself on the matter in very indignant terms.

In addition to the telegraphic message, Charles had written a letter to Mr. Frederick Blissett, setting forth how this unfortunate circumstance had occurred; and had also obeyed the rector's injunctions, in inquiring what were Mr. Blissett's intentions with respect to the widow's remaining at the Hall, or removing to the cottage called Rill Bank.

Throughout the day, he saw nothing of Miss Christie; but in the evening, much to his surprise, when he returned from dining with Mr. Mellish, he received a visit from her in the study. She had now her new mourning on; and the high black dress, with its small white collar and cuffs, became her, as it seemed to him, more than any attire she could possibly have worn; and yet, perhaps, if he had been an older man, even its beauty would not have struck him so much as the sad wisdom of that girlish face, in which grief for the dead was subdued, though scarcely mitigated, by anxiety for the living.

'It was thoughtful of you to come home so early, Mr. Steen,' said she, in her low sweet voice—'to leave the good rector's company for this mournful house;' and she turned an involuntary glance to the

wall, which now alone separated them from the visible presence of Death.

‘If I had thought I could have been of the slightest service to you, Miss Christie,’ said the young man earnestly, ‘I would have come home (since you are so good as to call it so) even earlier; nay, I would not have left—left home at all.’

‘We are sure of that, Mr. Steen—both mamma and I. You are so great a favourite of hers, that she wishes to see you’—and here she gave a troubled smile—‘upon some matter which she will not even confide to me.’

‘What!—to-night, Miss Christie?’

‘Yes, now—at once. Pray, don’t disturb yourself about the hour. Mamma, alas! takes scarcely any sleep. If you had been late instead of early, it would have mattered nothing.’

‘I am at your service, Miss Christie, and at hers,’ answered the young man, ‘now and at all times.’

‘That is what Mr. Mellish was promising for you to mamma this afternoon,’ said Christie with a grave smile. ‘He has become your godfather as to your intentions towards us, I assure you.’

‘I would my power were equal to my will,’ sighed Charles. ‘O, Miss Christie, is there anything—anything in the world that I can do? You will remember, even if I am of no use, that I had the will.’

‘Yes, Mr. Steen. At a time like this’ (she had led the way into the hall, and now made a pause at the door, behind which lay, in an unaccustomed room, the late master of that headless house), ‘we forget nothing.’

They passed up stairs in silence ; and when they reached Mrs. Blissett's door, Christie did but knock gently at it, and then signed to him that he should go in alone.

The widow was sitting on her couch, propped up by pillows, exactly as though she had never moved since he had seen her eight-and-forty hours before ; but the old resolute and set expression of her face was changed to one that, though woeful, was both kind and winning. For the first time, it struck him how like she must once have been to her daughter.

'Will you come and shake hands with me,' said she, 'and forgive me my rude words of the other day ?'

'I have nothing to forgive, dear Madam,' replied Charles, taking her wasted fingers, and carrying them to his lips. 'I trust you are feeling somewhat stronger—better ?'

'I am as well as I am ever likely to be,' answered she quietly. 'Sit you down there, Mr. Steen.'

He seated himself beside her, and close to a small table, on which he now perceived were laid a watch and seals, some money, and a penknife too large for a lady's use—articles which he at once rightly concluded had been found on the person of the deceased squire, and been given up to the widow that afternoon, on the termination of the inquiry into the cause of his death. He could scarcely keep his eyes off these dreadful mementoes, but Mrs. Blissett did not appear to notice them just now.

'I am informed,' continued she, 'that you have kindly promised to write to your—to Mr. Frederick

Blissett, with respect to his intentions as to our remaining at the Hall.'

'I have already done so, Madam; and if I could learn your own wishes in the matter, it would give me a genuine pleasure to convey them. Most earnestly do I desire to be of service to you and yours.'

'I and mine do not now comprehend much, Mr. Steen; but we should be all the more grateful on that account for your good-will. I know that we possess it; I can read it in your eyes and in your voice. Perhaps, to us poor crippled folk, from whom external nature is shut out, except so much of it as can be seen through a window-pane—perhaps, I say, it is given to us to discern man's character more easily than the hale—my dear Frank, yonder' (she looked upward), 'had a loyal confidence that all hearts were like his own (and alas, how it was abused!)—or perhaps it is that since we see so few of our fellow-creatures we study them the more earnestly, like some poor student with his half-dozen books. At all events, Mr. Steen, I am well persuaded that you are my true friend and Christie's.'

'God bless you, Madam, for that saying,' exclaimed the young man eagerly: 'now, only show me how to prove it. There is nothing—consistently with my duty to him I serve——'

'There is no need to make that proviso,' interrupted the widow gravely. 'God forbid I should tempt you to betray your trust! Tempt you, did I say?' added she bitterly. 'We have nothing, Christie and I, with which to tempt the poorest, or so little, in comparison with what we had, that it seems nothing. Yes, thanks

to the will of a man who died before her mother was born, my Christie is now penniless. Do you understand, Sir, we are paupers, my child and I?—but yet not beggars; let him know *that*. We are not dependent, even now, upon Mr. Frederick Blissett's bounty.'

'As *I* am, Madam.'

'True; I had forgotten, Mr. Steen. Grief and wrong make us very selfish. What I was about to say was that we shall leave the Hall at once; within the month. It is my intention to reside at Rill Bank. I regret, therefore, that you should have been troubled to communicate with Mr. Frederick Blissett upon that matter. It is unnecessary to explain to you—even if your relations with him permitted of it, which they do not—the circumstances that preclude my accepting favours at his hands; but I can accept none;' she spoke so far with vigour, and even vehemence, but her feeble frame gave way before she could conclude, and she sank back on her pillows, murmuring, in a faint voice: 'Never, no, never!'

Charles took advantage of the enforced silence to urge an argument which had been supplied to him for such an occasion as the present by sagacious Mr. Mellish.

'Forgive me, Madam, if what I am going to say may seem impertinent,' said he tenderly: 'but is it not possible that, weakened by sickness and broken by sorrow, your judgment may be somewhat sacrificed to prejudice—or, if you will have it so, to feeling? I do not speak of the certain damage to your own interests which even a negative expression of your antipathy would produce—but there is Miss Christie. You

would surely not desire your feud with Mr. Blissett to be hereditary ?’

The widow sighed. ‘You are wise beyond your years, Sir,’ said she slowly.

‘Nay, Madam, it is rather that you are blinded by your grief to worldly things, else you would see what is so obvious.’

‘I will think over the matter, Mr. Steen. It will be time to express our poor wishes when your patron has communicated his desire to hear them. I sent for you to speak of something else ; to ask a favour of another sort of you, and one within your power to grant.’

‘It is granted, Madam, before asked.’

‘I desire to know what was the coroner’s verdict this morning as to how my poor husband came by his death.’

A cold perspiration bedewed the young man’s face. The verdict was the very thing he had been enjoined by the rector to keep secret from the widowed invalid ; the matter about which he knew Mr. Mellish had himself been interrogated by her that afternoon without revealing the truth. He had told her vaguely that the decision arrived at by the jury was the usual one in such cases, and she had seemed to be satisfied ; but now it seemed he had only made things worse by the vagueness of his reply. It was evident that Mrs. Blissett’s suspicions were dreadfully excited. Her pale lips twitched convulsively ; her hollow eyes fixed themselves upon the young man’s countenance with pertinacious inquiry.

‘You have promised to tell me,’ gasped she. ‘I

have no one else in whom to trust. The rector deceived me—I am sure of that. Charles Steen, you are young and truthful; if the memory of your mother is dear to you, or if you hope to one day possess a faithful and loving wife, do not *you* deceive me also. What *was* the verdict?’

‘Well, Madam, I believe the jury were not all agreed. Some thought it should be Accidental Death——’

‘But the others—the majority,’ interrupted the widow impatiently, ‘what did they say? Was it——’ She raised herself slowly upon her hands, and breathing hard, like one in mortal pain, she whispered hoarsely—‘was it Murder? Was it Wilful Murder?’

‘Indeed, indeed, it was not, Madam!’ cried Steen eagerly; ‘you shock me by the mere suggestion of such a mischance, such a miscarriage of justice. The jury have behaved ill: they were persuaded, it seems, by a crotchety old fellow, one Dr. Fungus, to give an open verdict; but they did not exhibit the reckless folly which you attribute to them. Upon my honour, Madam, they did not. Their verdict was not Wilful Murder—nor Murder, of course, at all.’

‘What was it, then?’

‘It was, “Found Dead.”’

‘You are not used to falsehood, Mr. Steen. There is something behind your words: tell it.’

‘The verdict was what I have said, dear Madam—“Found Dead; but how the deceased came by his death, there is not enough of evidence to show.”’

The widow’s white lips moved slowly, as though committing these words to memory. Then she laid

her hand upon the young man's sleeve, and drew him towards her. 'Stoop down,' said she in low but distinct tones, 'and listen. You have begun this, and you must carry it out; God has laid it upon you.'

'Laid what, Madam?'

'I have felt it all along,' continued she, without noticing his inquiry; 'but I have had no friend to confide in until now. You are my friend and Christie's: you shall win my love and hers—you would do much for that?—That's well. "Found Dead; but how he came by his death there is not enough of evidence to show." It must be your task to discover what is wanting.'

'In the evidence, Madam?' exclaimed the astonished lad.

'Yes; you must find it. The guilt of blood must be brought home—*home*—do you hear?—to the man who killed my Frank.'

'Killed, Madam! Indeed he was not killed. The jury——'

'He was murdered, Sir. His blood calls from the earth to you, Charles Steen, and you must see justice done upon his slayer.'

The front-door bell was here rung so violently that the sound made itself heard in even that well-closed and secluded room. Breaking in upon the silence in which Death and Night combined to steep the house, and so immediately after such an appeal from the widow, it shook the young man's nerves. It was some little time before he spoke again.

'Supposing even your wild surmise were true,' urged he with hesitation, and half his mind attentive for that

strange sound to be repeated—‘and nothing seems to me more wholly improbable—how am I, a stranger in these parts, and ignorant of who were likely to be your husband’s foes, to set about the task you would impose upon me? Even if such a wretch exists as him you hint at, where am I to find him?’

The widow was listening also, with one thin finger raised, and her eyes fixed straight before her.

‘Where? Perhaps here — perhaps now. Who knows?—I hear the front door open. It is for you to act; for me to watch and wait. You have told me what I asked, and won my friendship. There is more to win yet, much more; but you must be up and doing.—Good-bye, dear boy, good-bye.’

There was a knock at the door, and Christie entered.

‘You are wanted, Mr. Steen,’ said she quietly, ‘down stairs.’

For a moment the young man’s heart seemed to cease beating: he grew cold from top to toe. For what was he wanted, and who had come for him at such an hour? Though he knew that Christie was looking from him to her mother with inquiring eyes, and holding the door open for him to pass out, his limbs refused to stir. When at last, with an effort, he arose and hurried out, one word from the widow’s lips seemed to fill his brain—the same which spoken by his royal master on the scaffold so long haunted Bishop Juxton’s ears, and scarcely with a greater significance—‘Remember!’



CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNEXPECTED RETURN.

CHARLES STEEN was not a nervous lad; young as he was he had had to 'guard his own head' in the world so often, and against such different opponents, that he had little fear, and still less was he subject to superstition. Yet he felt strangely apprehensive, fearful of he knew not what, as he closed Mrs. Blissett's door, and descended to the little sitting-room which had been appropriated to his use. His recent conversation with his hostess, the lateness of the hour, the unknown nature of the unexpected summons, all combined to unman him. He was quite startled upon entering his room at finding himself face to face with the stout butler, who was, naturally enough, awaiting him there.

'Here's a telegram just come for you, Sir,' observed that functionary in a portentous tone; for if an elephant and howdah had arrived to carry the young gentleman away, Mr. Maitland could scarcely have been more surprised. Telegrams, however common

at the railway station half a dozen miles away, were rare indeed at Allgrove. The inhabitants, unacquainted with them as mere channels of communication swifter than the post, regarded them as heralds of death and ruin; and the butler was holding the yellow missive between his finger and thumb, as though it could impart contagion, or was filled with some explosive material fatal to the recipient.

Steen snatched it from him, and hastily tore it open.

*'From Mrs. Maude, Clifford Street, London, to Charles Steen, Morden Hall, Allgrove on the Rill.—*Pray, come home at once, Sir. Mr. Frederick is very strange. Some news received to-day has upset him. I do not like to bear such a responsibility alone.'

'Does the night-mail stop at Chudleigh?' asked the young man eagerly.

'No, Sir, it does not. There is a parliamentary train very early in the morning, that gets into town at seven o'clock.'

'I must go by that, Maitland. There is news here which compels me to be in London as soon as possible.'

'Is Mr. Frederick ill, Sir?' asked the butler anxiously, yet not quite in that sympathising voice with which such inquiries are generally made. Doubtless it flashed across him: 'If this new master dies, my mistress will have her own again, and there need be no change in her domestic establishment.'

'Mr. Blissett is not exactly ill,' returned Charles absently; "but he needs my presence. Will you please tell Miss Christie that much? Or, stop—give me an envelope.' He wrote a few lines in pencil at the foot

of the telegram, and then enclosed it. 'Let her have this at once.'

The butler left the room as noiselessly as his weight permitted; he felt, as it were, freighted with mystery, and enjoyed it after the manner of his class. How oracular would he presently become to the attentive audience below stairs! If the misfortunes of our friends are not altogether displeasing, so the death and sickness of their betters are not an unwelcome topic to the denizens of the servants' hall.

Charles was left alone with Boleslaus for fully twenty minutes ere there was a gentle knock at the door, and Christie glided into the study, his visitor that night for the second time.

'You have read the telegram, Miss Christie?'

'O yes; but it seems very strange. Are you still determined upon starting by the first train?'

'Most certainly.'

'I suppose you are right,' said she quietly; 'mamma says she is sure you are. She bids me say: "God bless you," for her, and (though I do not know to what particular matter she alludes) implores you not to neglect her last injunction. "You will always be a welcome guest of hers," she adds, "although our home will henceforth be a very humble one." You have won dear mamma's heart, Mr. Steen.'

She looked so beautiful and kind, her voice was laden with such tenderness, that it needed some self-control on the young man's part, and recollection of the mournful circumstances by which they were on every hand surrounded, to prevent him crying out in a rapture: 'I would I had won yours, Miss Christie;'

as it was, he dared not trust himself to speak. Then, quite unconscious of the effect she was producing, the young girl went on: 'I have written this letter to Uncle Frederick, at mamma's dictation, telling him that she prefers, for many reasons—associations which he will easily understand—to leave the Hall almost immediately for Rill Bank; so that everything will be at once at his disposal. And I have added—with dear mamma's approbation—our thanks to him for having sent to us, at such a time, so kind and considerate a proxy for himself as you.—I will not detain you, Mr. Steen, for it is late, and you will have to start very early to-morrow.' She held out her small white hand in the old frank unconscious way; but it seemed to Charles that there was this time, as she referred to his departure, a little—a very little trembling of the voice. Her hand was trembling certainly, as though he had caught a fluttering dove within his double palms.

'God bless you, dear Miss Christie,' said he in broken tones: 'your mother and you have been very, very kind to me. I have been here such a little time, and yet I seem to be parting from old friends.'

'I hope so, indeed, Mr. Steen. You must write to us, you know—we shall, of course, be anxious to hear of Uncle Frederick's health.'

'I will write, Miss Christie, certainly. Be so kind as to let Mr. Mellish know why I did not take leave of him.'

'I will take care to do that, Mr. Steen.'

'And you will give my—may I say affectionate?—respects to your mother, and say that I will not lose

any opportunity—although I have no expectation that such will offer itself—of acquiring the information of which she stands in need.—There is nothing more, I think,’ said Charles, still retaining that fluttering hand, ‘except once more to renew the offer of my humble service, once more to give you the assurance of my—my deep devotion’ (the young girl gently, perhaps unconsciously, withdrew her hand) ‘to the interests of your mother and yourself. I am almost as powerless, I fear, Miss Christie, as I am certainly penniless; but such as I am, I am yours and hers—for ever.’

The tears came into her large eyes. ‘Good-bye,’ she murmured, and once again gave him her hand, but to be grasped only for a single instant.

‘Good-bye, Miss Christie.’

And Boleslaus and Charles Steen were alone again, his majesty looking much displeased at the whole affair.

In the morning before daylight, Charles had been driven by Robert the groom (grown more melancholy than any other servant, it was observed in the kitchen, since master’s death, and uncannily silent like a man who had something on his mind), to Chudleigh Station, and was far on his way to town.

Should he find his patron worse or better? Would his sudden coming annoy him, or the reverse? Had Mrs. Maude ventured to tell her lodger that she had sent the telegram? All these things passed through his mind; but what remained there, and did not pass, but obtruded itself again and again, was that strange unreasonable request made to him by Mrs. Blissett. Why should he, of all men—a mere boy, and an acquaintance of but a few days old—be selected by that

exacting lady as the avenger of a fancied crime? for was not Mr. Mellish, and indeed every other person he had spoken with except that queer little doctor, convinced that the squire had accidentally come by his death. And again, even supposing he *had* met with foul play, why should *he*, Charles Steen, a total stranger to the neighbourhood and its inhabitants, be considered a fit person to unravel such a mystery?

What the rector had undesignedly let fall before him, on the journey down, concerning his patron troubled him not a little. It would be difficult to keep in favour—or even not to arouse the displeasure (as he had already once or twice unwittingly done), of so eccentric and excitable a character. The retention of his appointment (such as it was) seemed to be very doubtful, and if Mr. Blissett withdrew his protection, whither was he to turn? Why was it that *this* reflection—which might have struck him almost with equal force on his way down to Allgrove, and yet, as we saw, failed to do so—presented itself in such dark colours on his return? If he did not acknowledge the reason even to himself, he could not help being conscious of it. Success in life, prosperity, sufficiency, about which he had hitherto been so little troubled, were now become of importance to him, because without them he could never hope to win Christie Blissett. As a dependant upon her uncle's bounty, such an idea was hopeless enough; but as a beggar—which he would certainly become, were that bounty to cease—it would be a mad phantasy indeed.

However seemingly inaccessible, however indifferent towards himself (and the sanguine young fellow did not

think she was altogether *that*), Christie had already become to him that object in life without which (whether it be ambition or a mistress) no man ever seriously sets about his work in the world. A few days back, and he had been without aims in life—a mere thoughtless boy; but now he had a motive for prudence, which, he flattered himself, would for the future govern all his actions. In the meantime it was his privilege to dream. Yes; without friends—without family—with a past too, some portion of which, if not in reality disgraceful, he could not now contemplate without a blush—on a hundred pounds a year, which could at any time be withdrawn at the whim of a capricious man, this young gentleman—so full of hopeful ardent vigour and youth—could lean back in the railway carriage and build and people his castle in the air with infinite zest. I say ‘in the air,’ for had it any foundations whatsoever out of cloudland? Yes. These words of Mrs. Blissett haunted him: ‘You have won my friendship. There is more to win yet—much more. But you must be up and doing.’ If the widow had not herein referred to her daughter’s hand as being the possible guerdon of his exertions, what other meaning could be attached to her words? True, when she uttered them she was in a state of great excitement, and even if she knew what she said, certainly not in a frame of mind to weigh her expressions; and, moreover, they would have no weight at all, if he failed in that very mission, the hopelessness of which he had acknowledged to himself. Still, those few sentences rang merrily in his ears as marriage-bells, and listening to their reiterated music, he

forgot the bitter years of dependence that were past, and ceased to anticipate those which (even if matters turned out well) were awaiting him in the future. He made a picture in his mind so bright and gay that all shadow was excluded, and while the dream lasted, was as happy as any opium eater of Cathay. Nor did he awake from it until the long train slowly dragged itself like a wounded snake into the London terminus.

He drove at once to Clifford Street, and reached it by half-past seven. The blinds were down (which made him start for a moment, until he remembered how early he had himself been stirring), and he rang the bell twice before it was answered.

'How is Mr. Blissett?' inquired he with anxiety of the astonished servant.

'Oh, he's much as usual, I believe, Sir. Leastways, I think he must be better, for he's gone out a-walking. I heard him leave the house at six o'clock or so—just as he used to do.'

It had been not unusual with the painter, previous to his recent indisposition, to fall into his old Indian habits, and take very early walks abroad, although, at other times, with characteristic irregularity, he would not retire to rest until after daybreak.

'Is Mrs. Maude up yet?'

'No, Sir.'

'Tell her I wish to see her as soon as convenient,' said Charles; and with that he retired to his own room, to refresh himself after his long journey. His ablutions performed, and the parlour affording small attractions, he walked into the studio, passing on his

way Mr. Blissett's room, the door of which stood open. He glanced within. There was the toilet-table, crowded with as many bottles of unguents and essences as that of any young belle; the little heap of frilled squares of linen on which the delicate occupant of the apartment was wont to cleanse his razor; the splendid dressing case, left lying open, and glittering like a jewel-drawer. Somehow, although the bed-clothes were disarranged, it struck him that the bed had not been slept in. In the painting-room, all seemed as usual. Lucius Sylla and his antagonist were in the same unfinished state in which he had seen them last, and other uncompleted pictures were still at the same stage. He was strolling from one to the other, when suddenly his eye lit upon a white board on which was executed a rough charcoal drawing. There were only a few bold outlines, but they were admirably sketched in, and presented a very graphic picture. It was a desolate landscape enough; no living creature was portrayed upon it, nor even a tree. The very time of year which it would have represented seemed, he knew not why, to be dreary, although not absolutely wintry. It was a very melancholy piece. One far-extending range of barren upland filled the background, and in front as bare a valley; a straight road running through high banks, cut it at right angles; all else was flat and level. On this sketch, which, roughly executed as it was, was in the painter's best manner, Charles Steen gazed intently. It was not, however, its artistic merits which engrossed him. This weird and dreary landscape seemed not altogether strange. Where and when could he have seen it? Did it lie in the neigh-

bourhood of Cayenne Lodge? No ; his remembrance of it seemed to be more recent. Had he seen it in any of those rides he was wont to take with his pupils the Maddens? No ; he had seen that landscape more lately still.—Then it flashed upon him all on a sudden, and he recollected it quite well. His teeth chattered ; his knees grew so loose that he had to support himself by the easel ; his hair seemed to bristle up ; his forehead grew damp with the dew of terror.

At that instant, the front-door was violently slammed to. The shock and noise acted upon him like brandy on a sinking man. He rushed from the studio into his room, and softly closed his door at the same time that that of the parlour was hastily opened. A quick step hurried through and passed into the studio.





CHAPTER XV.

THE CHARCOAL SKETCH.

NOTWITHSTANDING that Charles Steen cried out in a loud voice : ' Mr. Blissett, is that you, Sir ? ' as the footsteps hurried by, no answer was returned by that gentleman. But in a few moments they were heard returning, and he presented himself at his room-door. Charles might well have asked ' Is that you, Sir ? ' even after he had seen his patron. Always thin, the painter seemed to have shrunk to the dimensions of a skeleton ; his trousers hung about his legs as though they had been wooden ones ; even his thin hair was noticeably more scanty than it had been ; his eyes were sunk in their sockets, and had broad black rims beneath them, and they flamed crosswise upon him from their cavernous cells with unmistakable suspicion, terror, hate.

' How long have you been here ? ' gasped he.

' Not twenty minutes, Sir. Mrs. Maude sent me a telegraph——'

' I know all that.' (She had met her lodger as he

came in, and explained that much, and to that delay alone was Charles Steen indebted for having been able to reach his room without detection.) 'She is a fool, an idiot. Have you been here, in your room, ever since you came?'

'Well, Sir, I was very dusty, and a little tired; and soap and water' (he had thrown his coat off for the second time) 'are very grateful after travel.'

'Ay. Your impatience to see how our picture was getting on did not tempt you, then, to go into the studio?'

Those slanting eyes seemed to read his very soul, as the young man answered with a forced smile: 'Indeed, Sir, I never imagined you would have gone on with the picture by yourself; for Lucius Sylla was finished, you know, before I left; and for the other figure, I flattered myself you would have to wait for me.—How *did* you manage? Have you progressed far? and putting on his coat, Charles made as though he would have gone into the painting-room.

'Never mind that, now,' said Mr. Blissett, biting his nails, and with a glance at his young friend that showed his mind was not yet altogether satisfied. 'You must want your breakfast even more than I; there, ring for coffee. And now you *are* here—albeit there was not the slightest occasion for your coming; I am quite well, as you see, or at least quite convalescent—tell me how matters have gone on at Allgrove.'

'Well, Sir, the inquest——'

'Damn the inquest,' exclaimed the painter passionately. 'How dare you vex me by alluding to it? It

is a disgrace to the family that such a thing was ever permitted. Has not the—that infamous verdict given universal offence?’

‘It has indeed, Sir. Mr. Mellish and all the gentlemen of the county are very angry about it, and very sorry also, for Mrs. Blissett’s sake.’

‘Just so : very proper. As the head of the family, I must devise some means of letting them know how I appreciate their good feeling. It was a great shock to myself, of course. I dare say I may have done something at first sufficiently ridiculous to alarm Mrs. Maude ; she is not to blame, perhaps, after all ; and I am glad to see you back again, Steen ; it’s rather lonely here—’ he looked over his shoulder towards his own apartment with a half-shudder, then added with effort : ‘Well, and how’s Christie?’

‘She seems to me a pattern of goodness, Sir ; she attends to everything like a grown-up mistress of the house, and yet is always by the side of her sick mother. By-the-bye, she bade me give you this letter.’

‘Umph!’ said the painter, taking it into his hand, without, as it seemed, any particular eagerness to possess himself of the contents. ‘There is no letter from the wid—my sister-in-law, then?’

‘No, Sir ; but that note was written—so Miss Christie said—at her mother’s dictation.’

‘Ay ; you yourself, it seems, were admitted to the sick-room, were you not?’

‘I was, Sir.’ Charles was about to add ‘more than once,’ but he checked himself.

‘And what did my sister-in-law say?’

‘She acknowledged gratefully the kind expressions

conveyed in your letter, and expressed regret as well as surprise at your severe indisposition——'

'Why surprise?' interrupted the painter sharply. 'Is it so wonderful that a man who has been knocked about in the world as I have been should be taken suddenly unwell? Does she suppose my constitution to be of iron?'

'Well, Sir, I imagine that her husband was a very strong and healthy man, and never having known him to be ill, she concludes other folks to be like him. That very fact, doubtless, made his death more terrible to her, more unexpected, and, as it were, unaccountable.'

'And yet it seems to have been accounted for very easily, poor fellow, was it not?' observed Mr. Frederick, who had now got the letter open before him; although, so far from perusing it, he was earnestly gazing over the top of it at his young friend while he awaited his reply. 'You don't mean to say that Mrs. Blissett called her husband's death unaccountable?'

'Well, not exactly that, Sir; but I fancy she was unsettled by that verdict: "*Found dead; but how he came by his death——*"'

'I know all that, Sir,' exclaimed the painter furiously; 'you need not insult me by repeating it. Yes, it is enough to annoy anybody, although why it should *unsettle* them, I cannot imagine. What on earth did this poor lady say to make you think she was unsettled? Do you mean that she was touched in the head?'

'Nay, Sir; she was quite in her right mind,' observed Steen gravely, 'and gave me several messages for you concerning future arrangements. She has resolved to

leave the Hall at once and take up her abode at Rill Bank. The house will be entirely at your disposal, she bade me say, notwithstanding that I said there was no hurry within three weeks or so. I told her I was sure you would wish her to retain any articles of furniture, or whatever else she might seem loath to part with.'

'Quite right, quite right, Steen. Did she seem pleased with that arrangement—satisfied—?'

'Perfectly, Sir.'

'She expressed herself upon the whole, then, not unkindly towards me, eh? Of course it is no matter to me, but how *did* she speak of me, Steen?'

'She gratefully acknowledged your good-will, Sir, on Miss Christie's behalf, as well as her own. As to anything unkind, Mrs. Blissett would scarcely have spoken of you, in my presence, otherwise than with respect.'

'Ah, well; I don't know; she used to quarrel with me like the devil. But I am glad she has forgotten all that. Let bygones be bygones. She shall have the furniture, tell her—for of course you will go down to Allgrove again. Why do you stare? Who else is to represent me at the funeral? Good Heavens! Sir, am *I* in a condition to bear such excitement? I say she is to have what she likes. Don't stint her. But *here's* a letter! Why, they will take nothing. They ask permission to stay another ten days in the house! They sue as if I were some extortionate creditor, ay, *or even an enemy from whose hands they will take no favour, nor even quarter.*' His eyes crossed one another frightfully as he said this.

'O Sir—Mr. Blissett, I am sure you are mistaken,'

exclaimed the young man eagerly. 'Your sister-in-law has no intention of rejecting your kind offices, believe me. As for Miss Christie, why, as you said yourself, you are the only relative, save one, she has upon earth, and of course she looks to you for succour, protection, help of all sorts.'

'What they acknowledge most,' said the painter, knitting his brows, and paying no attention to the young man's words—'what they seem, forsooth, to be most grateful for, is your presence, Mr. Steen. I have exhibited my good-will to them, it appears, in nothing so much as sending you down as my envoy—that's what Miss Christie delicately implies. I suppose she doesn't know I picked you up at a night-refuge, does she?'

'No, Sir; she does not.'

Charles was crimson; but Mr. Blissett, still scowling at the open letter, did not observe his change of colour: he was busy with his own reflections, which ran something after this fashion: 'What does it matter? I can stop it all in a moment by telling these women what he is. And, in the meantime, this link between us will act as a conductor of good-will, sympathy, and all the rest of it. Yes.' Then said he aloud: 'Well, I am not sorry that they have taken a fancy to you, Steen, or believe you to be a—ha, ha!—a young gentleman. But I need not warn you (for you are a sensible lad) to bear in mind on which side your bread is buttered—to remember to which branch of this family you belong. Not, of course, that these relatives of mine and myself are otherwise than on the best of terms, but it is in my interest—*mine*—that you

are retained, and not in theirs. Do you understand, Sir?’

Charles perceived, too late, that he had committed a great error in showing his sympathy for the widow and her daughter. His patron’s jealousy was aroused. ‘I have done you no discredit, Mr. Blissett, at Allgrove,’ said he firmly. ‘From the instructions I received from you, I imagined that it was your wish to be cordial and friendly with your relatives, and I have tried my best to bring that about. It now seems that I misunderstood you.’

‘Stuff and nonsense!’ exclaimed the painter with sudden gaiety. ‘How you talk!—so smoothly, and in such rounded periods! You are certainly cut out for the pulpit, and perhaps I may send you there some day; after which you shall be my private chaplain — O, the newspaper, Mary—very good. Here, give it me.’

With an attempt at a careless whistle, which died away in the first bar, Mr. Blissett took up the *Times*, and ran his eye over its broad sheets. ‘Funds as they were: no news from abroad.—There are the leading articles for you;’ and he threw half the newspaper across the table to his young friend, retaining the other for himself. There was silence for full ten minutes, during which the painter kept the half-sheet before his face, apparently immersed in its contents. ‘Come,’ said he suddenly, in a strange husky voice, quite different from his usual cynical drawl; ‘since you *are* here, Steen, let us go on with Lucius Sylla.’

‘By all means, Sir.’

Crumpling the newspaper in his pocket, Mr. Blissett

led the way into the studio, and they there took up their positions as usual. In spite of a strong temptation to the contrary, Charles kept his eyes fixed upon the painter, until an opportunity seemed to present itself of liberating them. Mr. Blissett dropped his brush, and while he stooped to pick it up, the young man threw a rapid glance at the easel on which he had seen the charcoal drawing. *It was erased*; not a recognisable line remained, but only a confused smudge, which showed how hastily, though completely, it had been obliterated. Quickly as his eyes returned to their duty, they found those of the painter already awaiting them. Charles felt his heart melt like water before their searching glance; he knew that he was growing red and white by turns; that his previous visit to the studio was discovered; and the conviction flashed upon him—never to be removed—that in that moment he had involuntarily made this man his enemy. Mr. Blissett said not a word; but, as though his lips were suddenly become dry and parched, he moistened them with his tongue; this action, taken in connection with those basilisk eyes, reminded a beholder of the flicker of a serpent's forked sting. Presently, as he went on with his work, he carelessly put this question: 'Have you ever seen this Dr. Fungus, Mr. Steen?'

This Dr. Fungus!—the man's name had never been so much as mentioned before. Charles was overwhelmed with astonishment, nay, terror; and for the moment was really unable to reply further than by repeating the name in a tone of wonder: 'Dr. Fungus, Sir?'

'Yes; the idiot that led by the nose that parcel of

fools, the jury. It's all in the *Times* here'—he tapped his breast-pocket which contained the paper—'I have just read it. A whipping at the cart's tail would do the fellow good. Have you ever seen him, I say?'

'Yes, Sir.' And Charles detailed the quarrel that he had witnessed between Mr. Mellish and the little doctor.

'It must have been very funny,' said the painter drily. 'But this man's foolery has done more harm than he reckoned upon. My poor sister-in-law, as you say, is much put out about it. And, in my present state of health, such an annoyance has had a serious effect: I am very ill, Steen.'

'Indeed, Sir, I did not say so before, lest it should trouble you, and you seemed to wish to make yourself out quite strong again, but you look to me far from well. I do not wonder at Mrs. Maude having sent for me.'

'Yes; my constitution has suffered much,' said Mr. Blissett slowly; and these repeated shocks have been too much for it. My doctor says that I must go abroad, Steen, and at once. That will make no difference to you. You will go back this afternoon to Allgrove, and, in conjunction with Mr. Mellish—to whom I will give you a letter—look after matters there while I am away. On my return, I shall take a house of my own in London, when you will come up and make yourself useful.'

All this was said with the utmost deliberation, as though the speaker were unfolding a plan upon which he had long decided, yet the person addressed could not divest himself of the impression that all had been

settled and arranged within the last five-and-twenty minutes at farthest.

'I will give you some more money,' continued the painter, 'since I cannot tell when I shall return to England. Perhaps in a month, perhaps not for half a year. Your portmanteau is not unpacked, I hope?—So much the better. This picture must remain as it is: it is no use going on with it now. Come, let us leave off work, that I may at once begin my holiday.'

Without expressing any surprise (whatever he may have thought of them) at these unlooked-for arrangements, Charles followed his patron into the sitting-room.

'Hand me that Bradshaw, will you, Steen, and I will find out your train.'

Instead of being loath to part with him, as on the previous occasion, it seemed as if Mr. Blissett was only bent upon getting his young friend out of the house.

'O, I know the time, Sir. The train starts from Paddington at three o'clock.'

'Yes; but that was the wrong line,' answered Mr. Blissett gravely. 'I was so confused and worried, that I forgot that Harbrook Station, on the other railway, is more convenient than Chudleigh. It is a little further in point of distance, but nearer in that of time; the road is so much better. Yes, you will go to Harbrook; and indeed, Mr. Steen, you have no time to lose. I will send my instructions to Mr. Mellish by post, and you will of course hear from me as to my movements.' He tapped at the window, and stopped a cab that happened to be loitering by. 'Come,' said

he hurriedly ; ' there's a piece of luck. Let us take it as a good omen.'

' I sincerely trust, Sir, that change of scene and climate may set you up,' said the young man earnestly. ' You will let me know, at your earliest convenience, I hope, how you are getting on.—By-the-bye, I have never even set eyes on Mrs. Maude, who was so anxious about you.'

' Never mind *her*, Mr. Steen ; she will survive not seeing you. She has an easy time before her, as to her down stairs lodger. To-morrow—perhaps to-night—I shall be in France—next week, in Italy. Yes ; I think I shall go to Rome. Give Uncle Fred's love to Christie ; and my best regards to Mrs. Blissett.—Good-bye, Mr. Steen ; good-bye.'

If he had not been going to renew his mission, and, as it were, with fresh credentials, at Allgrove, it would have really seemed to the young man that he was receiving his *congé* by being (not very politely) shown the door. However, expostulation, even if the task imposed upon him had been as unpleasant as it was really welcome, was out of the question ; so he shook hands, and jumped into the cab. ' To the *South Western Railway Station*,' said Mr. Blissett himself to the driver, from the front-door-step. And off went the cab.

' Why is he so angry with me ? Why is he so suspicious of me ? Why on earth is he so particular about my going by the other line ?' thought Charles Steen gloomily as he jolted along. ' Does he wish me to avoid that dreadful spot which Mr. Mellish pointed out to me, for fear I should identify it with—— Great

Heaven! what *does* it all mean? It cannot—it is not possible, of course, that the thing can be anything more than a coincidence; yet why, before he had read about it in that report of the inquest, or had heard about it—for anything, at least, that I know—from any soul alive, should he have drawn that charcoal sketch of Burslem Bottom?’

For it was the scene of his brother’s murder, and no other, which the painter had sketched so faithfully that the young man had recognised it at the first glance.





CHAPTER XVI.

MRS. BLISSETT SENDS FOR THE DOCTOR.

IT is not years so much as stirring events which, about the period of adolescence, ripen our faculties, and make of the boy the man; in childhood, they may confuse rather than educate the mind, but when they occur somewhat later in life, they are the best of teachers. The results of mere time are often so tardy, that even in middle age we are still but overgrown lads; but grave and sudden occurrences will mould the plastic clay, so that it takes enduring shape for ever, and stiffen the pliant sapling so that it becomes at once a sturdy tree. We have seen the change that even a few eventful days wrought in Charles Steen, who had left town an aimless youth, and returned to it with aspirations and resolutions, if not with any settled plan. And now a few eventful hours with their fruit had effected in him a stranger transformation still. He could no longer solace himself with a vague dream of love! The sense

of an undefined responsibility, the shadow of a terrible mystery, lay heavy upon him, notwithstanding that he did his best to make light of them. In vain he reasoned with himself upon the folly of attaching importance to that charcoal sketch. What was there astonishing or unnatural in his patron's having chosen to delineate a scene which must of course have been familiar to him, and which had in itself those features of gloom and dreary solitude, so attractive to the painter's morbid tastes? But why, on the other hand, having sketched it, should he have been so swift to destroy it, so anxious (as it seemed) that no other eye should behold it—so solicitous to discover whether he (Steen) had visited the room in which it stood; and above all, why should he have been so wrathful even to the pitch of hate—for that terrible glance of the painters, eloquent beyond all vituperation, was stamped for ever upon his recollection—*when he discovered that the visit had been made*. It was that feeling of antipathy, he felt convinced, which had caused that sudden determination on the part of his patron (for sudden without doubt it was) to leave England—to place as great a distance as possible between himself and the lad whom, but a few days back, he had made his confidant—whom he had, as it were, almost adopted, and employed upon a delicate and important mission. It was that antipathy which had caused his presence to become so insupportable to Mr. Blissett that he had hurried him away within a few minutes of its strange and sudden birth. He had even dispatched him long before his time; an hour before the starting of that train, whose departure he was now awaiting, pacing up

and down the empty platform, and revolving all these things in his astonished mind. It was fated that he should not leave town without yet another subject for his thoughts to dwell on, yet another incident, which, if not as unaccountable as the rest, was certainly not calculated to make matters any clearer, or to remove his shapeless fears.

Just as the train was gliding out of the station, some last leave-taking or farewell gesture of some persons on the platform, who had come to see their friends off, drew his attention, and, glancing quickly out of window, he saw not only what had attracted him, but the figure of a man whose form was half-hidden by a wooden pillar, but whose never-to-be-mistaken eyes were greedily fixed upon the moving train. Mr. Frederick Blissett had followed him to the station, either to make sure that he had gone by the line which he had directed, or to satisfy himself that he had really taken his departure, and that every moment was henceforth widening the distance between them.

An indefinable terror seized the young man upon this discovery; and not until he had nearly reached his journey's end, did he recover his equanimity. By that time, however, he had hit upon an explanation, which it was curious had not occurred to him before, for much of what had happened. He called to mind the statement made by Mr. Mellish in his presence to Mr. Lane, and again repeated by the rector to himself in private talk, that Mr. Frederick Blissett was eccentric, almost even to the point of aberration. Doubtless the accident to his brother, and the sudden change in his own circumstances, had, for the time at least,

driven him even beyond that point. Among other misfortunes, it had certainly deprived him of the power of calculating relative distances in time; for not only was the road to Allgrove considerably longer from Harbrook than from Chudleigh, but so much more rutty and impassable, that the fly which he fortunately found at the station, took nearly double the time that Mr. Mellish's four-wheel had taken to traverse the hill-road that looked down on Burslem Bottom.

Already much comforted in his mind by the explanation just alluded to, notwithstanding that the ground for that belief—namely, the aberration of his patron—was in itself unhopeful, Charles Steen was still further cheered by his reception at Morden Hall. The woebegone face of the stout butler wore a smile of welcome, and the whole household seemed to rejoice at his arrival, as at the sight of a sun-gleam in a day of gloom. Perhaps the presence of their new master's representative relieved them of a sense of responsibility, while the grief of their mistress and her daughter (deepening as the day drew near which was to part them for ever from him they had lost), precluded all exercise of authority. Miss Christie sent down to him in the evening a few pencilled words in a sealed note, but did not make her appearance. He was told that she had not been seen down stairs that day.

The morrow was appointed for the funeral, and it took place accordingly. There being no male relative of the deceased to receive them at the Hall, the very large assemblage who came to show their respect for the dead man awaited the coffin in the churchyard.

Mr. Mellish of course read the service, not without some difficulty, for he was much affected; and many of his hearers were deeply moved. It was a strange experience for Charles Steen, thus to find himself chief mourner (although it was only by proxy) for a dead man whom he had never known, while all about him, though in a less prominent situation than his own, seemed so penetrated with the sense of loss. The poor squire, indeed, as Mr. Lane had said, had not only left no enemy, but there were few present among the poorer portion of the crowd — and this comprehended almost the entire parish — who had not received some substantial kindness at his hands.

It was curious that, notwithstanding the grateful excitement which had without doubt been afforded to this class (and perhaps to their betters) by the recent verdict, they resented it, as much as the gentry of the county, in the person who had been the cause of its being given. Rich and poor alike seemed to withdraw themselves from the neighbourhood of little Dr. Fungus, who had staid at his brother-in-law's farm for the express purpose of being present on this occasion.

The entreaties of that relative had induced him to abandon his intention of putting a crape band round the white hat turned up with blue; but, though he had a black hat, the blue spectacles bestrode his nose as usual, and his blue umbrella afforded a singular contrast to the sombre appearance of those of his own class, though, of course, many of the poorer sort were without the trappings and the suits of woe. He stood

near the grave-mouth—quite a little space being kept clear about him—and took his last view of the poor squire with the rest, if not with so sorrowful a countenance, with a very stern and thoughtful one; then slowly took his way, without exchanging a syllable with anybody, towards his brother-in-law's house, that sturdy yeoman himself lingering behind, and conversing with his neighbour, as though to show he in no way sympathised with the unpopular course his relative had thought proper to pursue.

The sad ceremony over, and Mr. Mellish withdrawing himself somewhat hastily to his own house, Charles Steen was earnestly interrogated by Mr. Lane, and others to whom that gentleman introduced him, concerning the health of the widow and her daughter; but as soon as he had answered them, as well as many humbler but not less sympathising inquirers, he turned his steps, not homeward, but to Farmer Groves'. The farm was some distance from the churchyard, so that the young man, walking very quickly, overtook the little doctor before he had arrived at his destination.

Although the latter must have been aware of his approach, he never turned his head, and even when they were side by side, so that he could not but recognise his face, he still plodded on in moody silence.

'I have something to say to you, Dr. Fungus, if you please, Sir,' said Charles with earnestness, though a little out of breath.

'I dare say you will say it, Sir, whether I please or not,' was the not very encouraging reply. But he did make a full stop nevertheless.

'I received this letter from Miss Christie late last night,' said Charles, putting the note into his hand. 'I was sure you would attend the funeral, or else I should have sent it over to you this morning.'

'And how came you to be sure of any such thing, Sir?' asked the little man irascibly. 'What obligation was I under to do anything of the sort?'

'None, indeed, Sir, that I am aware of: still, hearing you were at the farm, I thought it probable that you would attend, as indeed you have done.'

'Umph! Why does she write in pencil? Is the widow left so poor that she can't afford pen and ink? Who is to read it, Sir?'

'It is from Miss Christie, not Mrs. Blissett, Sir. Will you permit me to read it to you?'

'Certainly not. How do I know you will read it correctly?' *Dear Mr. Steen.* 'O, it's to you, is it? What do you give it to me for?' *We are both most pleased to find that you are returned. You will easily comprehend why you will not see us until to-morrow afternoon. Dear mamma seems, for the first time, utterly overwhelmed. She was so ill this morning, that I begged of her, on my knees, to see the doctor. You know how she dislikes to do that.* 'A deuced sensible woman!' interpolated the little man. *And she refused: but just now, to my surprise, she exclaimed: 'I will see the doctor, Christie. I have been thinking of it for the last twenty-four hours.'* I replied that Mr. Ricketts had just ridden by. 'He is an idiot,' observed the commentator parenthetically. 'I don't wish to see him,' said mamma. 'I wish to see Dr. Fungus. I understand that he is staying at Farmer Groves'. Let him be sent for.'—Will

you kindly, dear Mr. Steen, let this be done to-morrow morning?—Yours, most truly,

CHRISTIE BLISSETT.

‘It’s very complimentary,’ observed Dr. Fungus drily, as he returned the note ; ‘ but I’ve given up practice.’

‘ My good Sir,’ replied the young man pleadingly, ‘ between ourselves, this summons has nothing to do with sickness. She wishes (*I know*) to see you concerning the cause of her husband’s death.’

‘ Then I won’t come,’ said the little doctor emphatically. ‘ I have nothing whatever to say against the unfortunate gentleman whose funeral we have just attended ; but I am the last man to speak in his favour. He was not to blame indeed, yet, thanks to him, I have received—you must have witnessed it yourself—such treatment from that mob of dolts and fools we have just left as I can never forget. For doing my duty, Sir ; for abstaining from perjuring myself concerning the manner of his death, I have been made a Pariah, an outlaw. It is possible that some day these idiots—I refer to the entire population of the county—will perceive their error ; but in the meantime, I am subject to public ignominy scarcely short of what would fall to the lot—were he discovered—of Mr. Blissett’s murderer—I say his murderer, Sir, do you hear me ?’

‘ I hear you, Dr. Fungus. You are not the only person, alas, from whom I have heard the same terrible words.’

‘ Eh, what ? Has he confessed to you, then ?’ inquired the other hastily.

‘Confessed to me, Sir?’

‘Yes, Robert—the squire’s groom—has he confessed to you that I was right, and that he perjured himself—at Mr. Lane’s instigation? The chairman of the quarter-sessions, Sir! the very fountain of justice! Talk of the dregs of society; why, I believe if it was all turned topsy-turvy, the dregs could not conduct themselves with more unreason than the present scum.’ And the doctor ground the ferule of his umbrella into the wet earth, as though he were drilling a hole through the body of the county magistracy.

‘I know nothing of Robert’s false witnessing, Dr. Fungus——’

‘Then say nothing of it,’ interrupted the other gravely. ‘Will you give me your honour, Sir—unless the ends of justice should require you to speak—to be silent on this point? The fact is, the man’s conscience was pricked—and it’s something in this county, let me tell you, to *have* a conscience—on account of a certain reservation in his evidence at the inquest, and he has been to see me since upon the matter. If he had spoken out, the verdict, instead of *Found Dead*, would have been *Wilful Murder*. There; I have told you more than I am justified in doing, for I promised the poor fellow to keep his secret (since it is too late to make use of it), only I made so sure that it was to him you were referring when you said somebody else was of my opinion, and I thought he had unbosomed himself to you.’

‘His secret shall be kept, Dr. Fungus; but he has never breathed a syllable of the matter to me. The person I referred to, who believes with you that the

late squire came to his end by foul means, is his widow—Mrs. Blissett herself.’

‘Good Heavens!’ exclaimed the little man, turning pale, and pushing his blue spectacles up to his forehead, in order to get a clearer view of his companion. ‘Are you in your right senses, young man?’

‘Mrs. Blissett has confided to me her suspicion—nay, her conviction—in plain words,’ returned Steen solemnly.

‘Her conviction—her suspicions!’ ejaculated the doctor, putting his spectacles down again (for this time he required their long range), and looking cautiously around the empty leafless fields—‘her suspicions of *whom*?’

‘Of nobody in particular,’ answered Charles, hastily changing colour in his turn. ‘How can you ask such a question? I mean that she suspects as you do—she has taken it into her head upon no ground at all—that her husband was a murdered man.’

‘Mrs. Blissett may have no ground at all, Sir,’ answered the little doctor hotly; ‘but I don’t take things of that sort into my head without good reason. The case is simply this; the man whom we have just seen laid in his grave, however he came by his death, had but one wound; that wound, “not as wide as a church-door,” as Parson Mellish would say, “and as deep as a well,” but deep and wide enough, was in the back of his head; and nothing would have persuaded me—had I never been put in possession of the fact which I have since learned—that such an injury could have been inflicted save by a blow: if he had fallen from a giraffe upon a slab of granite, Sir, such a fracture could

not have been made. I come to this conclusion, as I told the coroner when he put the question directly to me (though it seems I ought to have perjured myself, for the sake of public feeling), notwithstanding that I had found the corpse, as I believed it had been originally found *upon its back*; but the groom tells me now that when he first came up, his master's body was lying *upon its face*, and that he turned it over. Now, if Mr. Blissett met with his death at the hand of Mother Earth, he must needs have been found upon his back; for after such a wound as I describe, no human being could have moved a muscle, far less have turned himself right over. No, Sir; unless an aërolite of many pounds-weight fell from heaven upon him, and afterwards buried itself out of sight in the frosty earth, that man was murdered.'

'But who could possibly have done it? And how could the wretch have got away without leaving the least trace?'

'I am a doctor, my young friend, and not a detective,' replied the little man, treating himself to a pinch of snuff after his somewhat lengthy statement, for he was usually a man of short incisive sentences, and averse to prolonged talk: 'it is not my business any more than yours, to say who did it; though, as for his getting away, there is the station, at which you must have got out yourself, when you came down to Allgrove, only a mile or two from Burslem Bottom.'

'Was any inquiry made, do you know, as to the passengers to town by the early trains from Chudleigh that morning?'

'I should say, "Certainly not." You have been

in this county but a very short time, young Sir, or you would scarcely credit its authorities with such sagacity. To overwhelm a man with unmerited obloquy, to outlaw an individual for the unprecedented crime of possessing intelligence, they are most ready and energetic, but if I wanted to put any obnoxious person out of the way by violence, without fear of discovery, this neighbourhood would be the chosen scene of my operations.'

And the little man absolutely grinned with rage, as his mind reverted to his wrongs.

'Since Mrs. Blissett, however, is not only not among those who have misjudged you,' pleaded Charles, 'but is most grateful to you for your ill-rewarded exertions, you will not refuse to grant her request—you will come and see her, Dr. Fungus?'

'I will do nothing of the kind, Sir,' answered the doctor fiercely: 'no, not if she was to offer me the fee-simple of the Druid Ring (good lack, to think that such a priceless relic of the past should belong to a country squire, who builds walls of the materials!)—no, Sir, you may tell her what I have said (with the exception of the groom's revelation, which we have agreed to keep secret); you may assure her, if that is any satisfaction to her, that her conviction and my own are identical, but I, Dr. Fungus, have washed my hands of this matter for ever. The skulls of half the magistrates in the county may be cracked, for all I care, and "Died by the visitation of Providence" be the verdict in every case. And if you have got any common-sense yourself, young man, I would recommend you to be careful how you exhibit

it down here ; don't cast your pearls (as I have done) before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend *you*.—Good-morning, Sir ;' and with a short nod of farewell, more pregnant with obstinate determination than any verbal denial, the little doctor went his way.





CHAPTER XVII.

WORSE THAN A SURGICAL OPERATION.

THE interview which Charles Steen had had with Dr. Fungus, although it did not produce the desired result (for the doctor, as if to avoid being further pressed to visit the Hall, left Allgrove for his own house, near Newnham, that very afternoon), yet was not without its fruit. The little man's earnest and convincing words had quite inoculated Charles with his own belief, that the late squire of Allgrove had met with no accidental death. There were now, therefore—not to speak of the faint suspicions which actuated the majority of the jury—no less than three persons in the world—himself, Robert the groom, and Dr. Fungus, who were persuaded of this upon reasonable grounds. And there was the widow, more deeply impressed, perhaps, with the same conviction than any of the three, although upon no grounds at all. It was quite unnecessary, however, for the doctor to have laid an injunction of silence upon Charles Steen. The more he thought of this horror—the more strength his new conviction gained

—the greater repugnance he felt against moving in the matter. He had not hitherto quite made up his mind as to whether he should inform the rector of Mr. Frederick Blissett's late eccentric conduct concerning the charcoal sketch, or not; but he was now quite resolved to be silent on the subject; resolutely determined also to do his best to combat the widow's wild and baseless misgivings, although he had now got his own doubts as well as hers to overcome.

As he passed the rectory, he looked in upon Mr. Mellish, and that gentleman—sitting empty-handed and forlorn enough before his study-fire, and thinking of the dead—was unfeignedly glad to see him.

'The sight of you, my dear young friend, this sad afternoon, yonder' (and he pointed in the direction of the churchyard), 'was the only gleam of sunshine that met my eyes. I knew you would be there, however, for I had a letter from Mr. Frederick this morning. A strange letter, Steen, for a man to write upon the day before his only brother was to be buried, wholly and solely concerning the goods which he has become possessed of by his death: but then your patron *is* a strange man.'

'He is, Sir,' said Charles hastily; 'and stranger now, I do assure you, than ever. I honestly think, between ourselves, that for the time—so powerfully have recent events worked with him—he is not responsible for what he does, or says, or writes.'

'I hope not,' returned the rector gravely: 'I should be glad to think that such is the case. You are a very young trustee, Steen, and he and I were never very cordial, yet he leaves all his business to be transacted

by us two. As for my part in the matter, that does not astonish me so much, for he has sufficient knowledge of me to be sure that he is in safe hands, while friends of his own he never had, except, indeed, his poor brother; but you—whom he has been acquainted with so short a time—must be a great favourite of his, to have such trust reposed in you.'

'So far from that being the case, Mr. Mellish, I assure you, upon my word and honour, that I believe Mr. Blissett dislikes me.'

'Then he must be mad,' said the rector, with a sharp glance over his shoulder at his young friend.

'Perhaps he is,' said Steen gravely, with his eyes fixed upon the fire. 'I sometimes think he must be.'

'Well, since we are both agreed upon that point,' answered the rector confidentially, 'and since you have already discovered for yourself that Mr. Frederick's regard for you does not quite extend to affection, I may say there is a passage in his letter which seems to hint at that latter fact. It reveals nothing to your disadvantage, mind, in any way, but yet it is just the sort of revelation which a warm friend would have kept to himself.'

'He tells you where he found me,' said Steen, bitterly, 'and so by implication puts you—and others—on your guard against me. There is not much to be expected, he would say, of a lad picked up at a night refuge.'

'I confess,' replied the rector slowly, 'that such was my impression of what the letter intended to convey. If it was meant to prejudice me against yourself, it totally failed in its object; it only sank the writer in

my estimation. I am sure you were not to blame—it was not through your misconduct, I mean, that you became destitute.'

'You shall judge for yourself, Mr. Mellish. I was to blame, at all events, that I did not reveal the matter to you myself, and I am fitly punished by this humiliation. Will you listen to my story from my own lips?'

'Yes, Steen; and I shall believe it implicitly.'

Then the young man rehearsed to the rector the same narrative which we have already heard him confide to his patron in Clifford Street; and Mr. Mellish listened with great attention, once or twice making a pencil-note in his pocket-book, as the history proceeded.

'You are not ashamed of me, Sir?' pleaded the lad when all was finished.

'No, indeed,' said the rector kindly. 'Why *should* I be?'

'And don't you think Mrs. Blissett and Miss Christie would be ashamed of me?' added Charles eagerly.

'Most certainly not, my boy.'

'Then please to tell them, Sir, all about it: how I was a beggar—a pauper—but a few days ago; for I could not, no, indeed, I could not tell them myself.'

'I will acquaint them with all the circumstances, my good lad; and do not fear any change of feeling towards you in those two ladies. For one reason, I am heartily glad to hear all this; since—I don't mind telling you now—I took it into my head at first that, unknown to yourself, you were Mr. Frederick's natural son.'

'Did they think that at the Hall?' inquired Charles

with burning cheeks and in a trembling voice. 'Did they think I was *his* son?'

'No. Mrs. Blissett, to whom I communicated my suspicion, was positively certain—after your first interview with her—that such was not the case. I do not wish to repeat to you anything said to the disadvantage of your patron, or flattering to yourself; it is enough to say that she combated my opinion very warmly. Indeed, I was almost convinced that I was mistaken, until this letter arrived, which, somehow, once more awakened all my doubts. I firmly believe that it was framed partly with that object. The writer speaks of you exactly as a man would speak of one who had a personal claim upon him in equity, though not in law. He declines all positive responsibility—even to the extent of revealing to us a past, which he deems disgraceful, by way of warning—and yet, in the same breath, as it were, he imposes upon you a considerable trust, and hints at future material benefits to be conferred. He announces his intention, when he has returned from abroad, and can give his own attention to business matters, to send you to Oxford. Did he say anything of that to you?'

'Mr. Blissett did just hint at such a thing, Sir; but I attached no importance to the remark.'

'It would be a most excellent thing for you, Steen; the university, to one who has brains and diligence, no matter what else he lacks, is the high road to independence and social station.'

'O Sir,' cried the young man, clasping his hands, as though some beatific vision had been suddenly presented to him, 'how I would work to gain them!'

‘Well, then, why not begin at once? The fruits of study are never utterly thrown away, at all events; and if, on the other hand, Mr. Blissett does carry out this excellent intention, it is most important that it should find you prepared to take advantage of it to the utmost. Now, I will be your tutor. Come to me in a day or two—to-morrow, if you like—and let me find out what you know. I remember enough of the classics, I flatter myself, to put you a long way on the road, which, if all turns out well, you will have to travel.’

‘I thank you, Sir, from the bottom of my heart,’ cried the young man earnestly; ‘you do not know what hopes you have kindled within me. How very, very good and kind you are!’

‘Tut, tut, Sir. All old pedagogues—and I was a tutor once myself—like somebody to teach. It gives us again that blessed chance of tyranny, which, like your friend Lucius Sylla, we have voluntarily resigned. Pooh, pooh! it is so indeed. You are too ready to incur the sense of obligation, my young friend.

The untainted virtue of your years
Hath not yet dived into the world's deceit,

or you would not be so thankful for the opportunity of a classical education. A single play of William Shakspeare's, Sir, has more of wisdom, fancy, wit, in it than all the—— But there, that's treason. Come; you have wasted time enough on an old fellow like me; I think it likely—since you have not seen the ladies—that they may have something to say to you; and certainly you should communicate to them, as

early as possible, Mr. Frederick's civil messages. I don't see what he could have done more, since his sister-in-law herself insists upon leaving the Hall, than say: "Take what you wish."

Upon this hint, after once more expressing his sense of the rector's kindness, Charles took his leave, a happier man than perhaps he had ever been before. The idea of going to college had given him new life; something seemed to whisper that those rose-coloured views of the future in which he had indulged might not, after all, be dreams. It was curious, though far from unnatural, that he felt the good-will of the rector, who had promised by comparison so little, far more than that of his patron, who had promised (or at least hinted at) so much. He was far from being ungrateful to the latter for all he had done for him, and fully resolved to be his faithful minister in whatever he should be set to do. But it is possible to confer even material benefits in such a manner as to sow not a single seed of love in the recipient. A bone may be 'chucked' to a dog; but to the starving human creature whom we would inspire with regard for us, it must not be chucked, but bestowed with a gentle hand and gentle words. Thus, although Charles owed (and was dutifully ready to pay) all fealty to his patron, yet he felt towards him none of that affection with which Mr. Mellish and Mrs. Blissett (not to mention Christie) had inspired him, albeit they had given him nothing but kind words.

Never had the young man's step been so elastic, his heart so light, as when he came in sight of the Hall, on the windows of which—now shutterless for

the first time—the beams of the early setting sun were shining brightly. There would surely be a happy time before him, while his patron was abroad, and this place, so near to Miss Christie's future home, was appointed for him to dwell in. He felt indeed for her bereavement; but it was impossible that the loss which she bewailed (the greatness of it being unknown to him) could sadden him to the same extent, and he knew that the healing touch of time must sooner or later cure her pain. The only thing that weighed upon his mind was the private conference that he must needs presently have with Mrs. Blissett: his unwillingness to talk with her upon that subject which she was only too certain to broach, had grown to positive repugnance; and the approaching interview—complimentary to him as was its confidential nature—overshadowed his present, like the contemplation of some necessary surgical operation, *after which* life has nothing to offer us but what is pleasurable. In the meantime, we shudder.

His forebodings were quickly realised. No sooner had he reached the study, than a female servant communicated the expected summons from her mistress that 'she would be glad to see Mr. Steen as soon as convenient;' and the young man at once followed the messenger up stairs, with a cast of countenance that would have suited any of those sombre ministers of the dead of whom the house had only just been cleared. How he secretly anathematised that cowardly little Dr. Fungus, who had laid the train of suspicion, and set light to it, and then left him to bear all the consequences of the explosion! Not even a sight of

Miss Christie was afforded him to cheer his spirits. The invalid was on her couch as usual, but quite alone.

‘I am very glad to see you back again, Mr. Steen,’ said she cordially, yet in a tone which showed how little her bruised heart could know of gladness; ‘and yet it is very selfish of me to feel so, since this house of mourning is unfit indeed for the home of one like you; and Christie and I are wretched company.’

‘I was very willing to return to Allgrove,’ replied Charles simply.—‘How are you, Madam, and Miss Christie?’

‘Christie is well, thank God, Mr. Steen.—Have you any news for me?’

With a great effort, Charles maintained his calmness. He well knew to what the widow’s earnest inquiry referred, but he resolved to avoid the subject, unless it was absolutely forced upon him.

‘Yes, dear Madam,’ answered he; ‘much news. Mr. Blissett, who still continues far from well—indeed, he seemed certainly worse than when I last saw him—has decided, acting on the advice of his doctor, upon going abroad. He is, in fact, I have no doubt, already gone, and the date of his return is quite unsettled. He bade me say that, since you seemed determined to remove to the cottage, you must of course do so; but, at the same time, expressed his earnest wish that you should take with you from the Hall whatever you pleased; not only such things as might be especially dear to you as—as mementoes—but any articles of furniture——’

The widow’s wasted but expressive features here

exhibited such evident impatience and incredulity, that the young man began to hesitate and stammer, and at length came to a full stop.

‘Ay,’ said she coldly, and without noticing his embarrassment, ‘he is very considerate, this patron of yours.’

‘He intends to be so, my dear Madam, and I sincerely trust you will not reject his offers; he did not like your leaving the Hall—“Just as though I had turned them out of it,” said he—nor the tone of Miss Christie’s letter, which, indeed (for he read it to me), was certainly somewhat cold. I do hope——’

‘Have you any news for me, Charles Steen?’ repeated the widow in the same deep and earnest tones; ‘tidings of another sort than concerning houses and furniture? Or if you have not, have others? Did you give my message to Dr. Fungus?’

‘Yes, Madam; and I have had a long talk with him. He maintains the same opinion which he expressed at the inquest; perhaps all the more obstinately because it is so unpopular. But he will not come and see you. He feels outraged at the ill-treatment which he has, it seems, received from every hand, on account of the evidence he gave before the coroner; and he will have nothing more to do with the matter. His resolution is fixed upon that point.’

‘Then I have only you to trust in, Mr. Steen,’ said the widow gravely. ‘For the third time, but not the last (for I *will* know), I ask: “Have *you* no news?”’

‘I was, of course, at the funeral this morning, dear Madam,’ answered Charles, endeavouring in vain to re-

main calm. 'There was a vast company present, and their grief was very genuine. If respectful sympathy could mitigate such a blow as has fallen upon you, you would suffer little.'

'I am obliged to them all, Mr. Steen. My poor husband was dear to many. When the ear heard him, it blessed him; when the eye saw him, it gave witness to him; he caused the widow's heart—the widow's heart,' repeated she in anguished tones—'to sing for joy.'

'There did not seem to be one in the churchyard, Madam, rich or poor, who came there for mere form's sake.'

'Ay; *he* was not there, then,' murmured she, as though talking to herself. 'If he *had* been—if he had dared to come—and had so much as touched the coffin, his wickedness would surely have been made apparent. It used to be said so, and if such things did ever take place, they would have done so to-day. If he had touched the body, the wound would have broken forth afresh, and the blood cried out against him!'

'Against whom, Madam?' inquired Charles in a trembling voice.

A terrible look came over the widow's face, and for the moment, it seemed to Charles that he would have lost his right hand if he could only have recalled his question; but the sudden glow in those hollow eyes as suddenly died out; and she shook her head, as though in reply to some inward thought.

'Against his murderer,' said she slowly; and awful as

that answer was, it took a weight off the young man's heart, that had almost stopped its beating. 'Have you no news of *him*, Charles? I think you have. Yes; you have seen the first footmarks of that trail which will lead at last to the shedder of my husband's blood. You *have* seen them——'

The young man heard no more. The widow's piercing look, her solemn searching tones, her immediate reference to the shadowy but dread suspicion that haunted his own mind: all these things combined to overcome mind and body so completely, that he lost consciousness, and fell into a sort of faint or swoon. When he came to himself, he was still in the widow's room, sitting in the same arm-chair as before; but his throat was bare, and his neckcloth on the floor, and about him was a sense of fragrance and coolness.

'You are better now, Mr. Steen,' whispered a musical and tender voice, and he looked up and saw Christie standing over him, and bathing his forehead with some refreshing scent.

'O yes, poor fellow, you are much better now,' said Mrs. Blissett, with a look that conveyed nothing but compassion and kindness.—'Take him out of this sick-room, Christie, into freer air; and see that he has some refreshment at once, for I am sure he needs it.'

The operation was over; but it had been more severe than the patient's worst fears had suggested to him.



CHAPTER XVIII.

SUNSHINE.

EVERY season has doubtless its own troubles, yet, to some of us—if not to many—it is given to enjoy some portion of life almost without alloy; it may be—and, alas! generally is—but a little portion, but while it lasts it is the very foretaste of Paradise. It stands out in such contrast with the rest of our existence, that it is distinctly seen as we look back, no matter over how many an intervening year. It happens almost always at that epoch when the restraints incident to boyhood are removed, yet the responsibilities belonging to manhood have scarce assumed definite shape—when health is most vigorous, when hope is highest, when Life ‘goes a-maying’ with Youth and Love. And it was upon this blissful period that Charles Steen was about to enter.

If the forebodings of his heart had not deceived him, neither had its anticipations. For the first time in his life, he was living among friends—among those who loved him for his own sake. He had work enough to do to make him appreciate leisure : first, under Mr.

Mellish's supervision, but very soon independently of his assistance, he controlled the expenses of house and garden (the rents of the estate were collected by a lawyer at Newnham), and kept an account of all things, in the interest of his patron. He set the Hall in order after the manner he judged would be most pleasing in that gentleman's eyes; taking particular care to arrange the extensive though very heterogeneous contents of the library—an apartment the principal use of which had hitherto been for old fogies to play at whist in, when the squire and his lady (years and years ago) chanced to give a ball. He had enough of study (thanks to the good rector, who 'coached' him with great regularity, if not dispatch; for, to say truth, his Greek was getting a little rusty, to make him thoroughly enjoy the hours of holiday. These he spent, sometimes, in ordinary country fashion, in shooting, for there was no lack of guns or game at Morden Hall; or in coursing upon the downs, for Mr. Groves kept many greyhounds, and the rector had in the exercise of his discretion retained one good horse in the squire's stables, though the rest were disposed of; but chiefly in fishing, not, it must be confessed, because he was particularly partial to that diversion, but because the boat-house adjoined that which belonged to Rill Bank, the cottage at which the widow and her daughter now resided, and being so near, it was but common civility to 'just step in' and inquire how they were.

If he was successful with rod and line, they reaped the benefit of his good-fortune; and if he was not, what more natural than that he should 'just step in' again, after putting up the boat, to express his regret?

When he did not fish, it was surely better taste 'to just step in' in person with the brace of birds he had bagged in the turnips, or the pheasant he had shot in the wood, than to send a servant with his empty compliments: or after a day with Farmer Groves, that, in leaving a hare at the cottage-door, he should 'just step in' to say that it was 'coursed,' which is a matter of culinary importance. It would have been the height of inhumanity to let the poor young fellow dine all by himself in the great house, so he had a standing invitation to dinner at the rectory; and when he did not arrive there at the appointed hour, Mr. Mellish sat down without him, being well aware that his young friend had 'just stepped in' at Rill Bank (doubtless upon some matter of the last importance), and been asked to stay to dinner.

Upon these occasions he did not, of course, dine alone with Miss Christie (although there is no reason to suppose that he would have resented even that arrangement), but with her mother also. The meal was served in the drawing-room, into which the invalid was wheeled, sofa and all, from her bed-room, which was contiguous to it. She was not in reality improved in health (although, singular to say, she was no worse), but her indomitable spirit caused her to make greater exertions, now that she considered there was a necessity for them. She would not suffer Christie's existence to be passed as the mere attendant of an invalid; nor permit her to be depressed by melancholy talk. So, if the widow rarely smiled, she never, in her daughter's presence, gave way to passionate grief, and neither avoided nor dwelt upon the topic of their

common bereavement. Upon the subject, however, of taking 'what was wanted' from the Hall, Charles found Mrs. Blissett quite inexorable. Her dislike of her brother-in-law (although she never expressed it in words) seemed to increase rather than diminish. The very wine she drank (and a little wine was absolutely necessary for her, said the doctors) was procured elsewhere than from her late husband's cellars; and even the game with which her young friend so plentifully furnished her table was received under protest. The widow (by comparison with her former position, at least) was very poor. Two hundred and fifty pounds was the extent of her yearly income, and though she administered it with her usual discretion, it was difficult, particularly on first entrance into a new house, to keep within her means.

Small as Rill Bank was, it was extremely pretty. It was placed high and dry, on a lawn of tolerable size, which ran down to a small wooden terrace (with an arbour at one end, and set with half-a-dozen urns for flowers) skirting the river. A few steps of stone led up to the down stairs sitting-room, its bow windows ornamented at the top with a circle of painted glass, and looking from the water very gay indeed. But the drawing-room was the gem of the house. No larger than the room beneath it, it commanded one of the most charming river-views imaginable, and one which was never destitute of life. The Rill was not only navigable in itself, but joined a very large river at Newnham, and not a little barge-traffic was carried on along it, by means of a towing-path on the opposite side.

At no great distance was a lock, half seen (as the spring came on) through intervening foliage ; and it was a picture of which the eye never tired, to see the great gates slowly open to admit the flood, and the liberated boats come forth into the sunlight to toil or loiter along the water highway ; pleasant, beyond description, to listen in the still afternoons to the cry of ' Lok, lok, lok ! ' from unseen voyagers far down the wooded reach ; or to hear the wondrous music welling up from those resonant walls when the rowers sang (as many did) while pent within their watery prison. As the days lengthened and grew warmer, the traffic increased, not only of commerce, but of pleasure, and many a skiff, almost as bright and swift as the river-insects that flitted hither and thither in the sun, shot by the cottage ; not seldom, larger boats, too, with holiday folks on board of them—quite gilded galleys of the Cleopatra sort, with cushions of scarlet, and perhaps a band, the strains of which, if failing to satisfy a critical ear on land, were borne charmingly cool and mellow across the stream ; while more rarely still, but even more welcome, came the racing-boats, in training for some river-regatta, with an accompanying music of their even oar-blades, delightful to listen to as it waxed and waned.

All day long was seen the stately pageant of the swans, except when, not so stately, their curved and snow-white necks went suddenly under water, and they presented themselves reversed—like gigantic water-lilies in bud.

From morn to eve, the ferryboat plied intermittently, now filled with market-folks going forth with

baskets filled with produce, or returning with light load ; now conveying but a single passenger with dog and gun, or solitary fisherman. The whole river scene was busy as a fair, and yet so calm and quiet, except for the low melodious unceasing thunder of the hidden lasher. Not seldom, when the days grew warm, did Christie take her seat in punt or skiff, and journey with the youth upon that silent highway ; amid the osier isles, from whence the swan upon her nest hissed angrily, while the fierce male ploughed foamy furrows in the wave with his swelling breast, and flapped defiance ; or up the back stream, where the withy baskets which lay in the stream all night gaping for fish, dried on their high platforms. No prying eyes were there ; only the swallows flashed and skimmed around their drifting boat. No sound was heard except the dreamy caws of the circling rooks, or ever and anon, from the distant woods, the monotone of the herald of the summer, whereupon one would say : 'Hush ! Listen !' and the other : 'Yes, you're right : it is the cuckoo.'

A happy time, when both on land and stream 'twas

May, from verge to verge,
And May it was, with them, from head to heel.

If the meaning of an idyl lies in two young people, picturesquely circumstanced, doing nothing, and taking the utmost pleasure in their idleness, these river-trips of Christie and Charles Steen might be so called. If another definition of the term needs be sought, it may be found in this, that it was not

long before they began unconsciously to idolise one another.

Fortune, too, as if not content with bestowing on the young man these ethereal and transcendent pleasures, added a bright gleam of material prosperity—gave him a great slice of solid pudding. It came to pass in this wise. Mr. Mellish, who had had long on hand an invitation to visit an old college-friend of his, whose living was situated in the neighbourhood of Cayenne Lodge, departed one fine morning on that errand, much to the surprise of those who knew him best.

A run up to London for the day was in general the extent of the rector's absence from his parish, it being even whispered that he had become so completely the old bachelor, that he could not sleep away from home ; yet in this case he disappeared without saying a word to anybody, for six whole days, the extreme limit of a clergyman's holiday. The churchwardens had almost made up their minds to offer a reward for his discovery, and to appeal to the Home Secretary for a free pardon to all concerned in his assassination, except the actual murderer, when the reverend gentleman suddenly turned up on the Saturday night.

'Where on earth have you been, Mr. Mellish, and what *have* you been about?' cried Steen, who had called at the rectory, after dining at Rill Bank, and to his great joy found his friend and preceptor safe and sound.

'Well, Sir, I have been to a place with which you are well acquainted,' returned the rector coolly, 'and have occupied myself solely with your business.'

‘I did not know I had any,’ said Charles, laughing.

‘No business, eh? Nothing but pleasure? That’s

The primrose way to the everlasting bonfire,

my young friend,’ answered the rector, with affected sternness! but the twinkle of his eyes, and the twitching at the corners of his mouth, betrayed that he was in the best of humours, and had some good news to tell. ‘Yes,’ he went on, ‘it is lucky for you, who thus neglect your own concerns, that you have a friend who interests himself in them.’

‘I am very lucky in that respect, Sir, indeed,’ said the young man with a grateful simplicity that went straight to the rector’s heart.

‘Well, Charley,’ said he, ‘the fact is, that ever since you told me your history, there was one point that puzzled me not a little. I never doubted your word, my dear boy; I knew you were telling me what you imagined to be the case; but in one instance I did doubt your facts. Thanks to this wise book, and he laid his hand affectionately on a pocket volume of Shakspeare, which lay on the table before him, and had been the companion of his travel, I know something of human nature, more, perhaps, than many who mix much more than I do in what they call “the world,” and see nothing but one man and one woman multiplied any number of times. From what you told me of Captain Mangoe’s great kindness to you during his life, I thought it in the highest degree improbable that he should omit—being so wealthy a man—to make some sort of provision for you by will. I have now discovered, Charles, that he did so.—There,

don't flush up so; it is not much; but you are no longer——'

'A beggar, Sir, or a dependant?' interrupted Charles earnestly. 'Is it really true that I am no longer that?'

'Yes; it *is* true. It was very wrong in Mrs. Mangoe to conceal the fact; it was something more than wrong in her to tell you (as I understand was the case) the mischievous falsehood that you were totally unprovided for; but I do not think for a moment she meant to defraud you of your due. She was actuated by a malignant feeling towards yourself, and perhaps she resented any portion, however small, of her late husband's wealth being bestowed upon one who was not his kith and kin. Her own account of the matter—for I brought her to book, I promise you, and frightened her not a little—was, that she thought it better for your moral health (you being of a very audacious and rebellious spirit, Sir) that you should imagine yourself to be entirely dependent; but that she had always intended to let you know the true state of the case sooner or later. She says that her having omitted to do so has been very much on her mind ever since you disappeared from Madden House, and that part of the county, without affording her an opportunity of telling you that her dear husband had not forgotten you. I assure you she put her handkerchief to her eyes, and seemed quite affected; but they do say it's only her grief that is affected, and that she is engaged to be married to her sons' tutor, who is about half her age. But as far as you are concerned, Steen, she has made all the reparation that could be expected, and we have

no right, in charity, to say' (and here I am afraid the rector winked) 'that she has been frightened into it. The long and short of the matter is, that a hundred a year was settled upon you for life by excellent Captain Mangoe, and you have had the first year's allowance paid in advance (the least she could do, I told her, considering to what straits her culpable concealment of the matter had exposed you); and here's the money in twenty-five pound Bank of England notes.'

It was pleasant to see the rector counting them out one by one with the most business-like gravity, while the recipient could apply himself to nothing save vain endeavours to express his fervent thanks towards his living friend, while his heart was full of no less gratitude towards him who had thus stretched forth to him a helping hand, as it were, from the very grave itself.

'This timely gift,' observed the rector, as they parted late with cordial 'good-nights,' 'will now, with some slight additional help (which, I dare say, will not be wanting, even though Mr. Blissett should alter his mind upon the matter), insure our Oxford plan—such power has gold to mould our dreams into realities. In the meantime, don't you be extravagant, my young millionaire.'

Which Charles, with a pleasant laugh, promised not to be. Yet, at that moment, the spendthrift had a scheme in his head for disposing of three-fourths of the money, and managed to put it into effect before the next week was out.

One of Mrs. Blissett's greatest pleasures in old times was to hear her daughter, who had a very charming

'touch' on the piano, play and sing to her. The widow had been herself a musician before her physical affliction, and she dearly loved to listen to the harmonies, which she could no longer evoke. When, however, she left the Hall, she declined to take with her the little cottage-piano which used to stand in her sick-room (notwithstanding that Mr. Mellish endeavoured to convince her that it was as much her own and belonged as little to her brother-in-law as her own bonnet and shawl); and so there was no music at Rill Bank. But on the Friday next after the rector's return, there arrived from the railway station an immense parcel, which turned out upon inspection to be a very small but very pretty piano, and the carrier knew nothing about it except that there was nothing to pay.

'Who can it have come from?' cried Christie, her eyes dancing with delight as this fairy casket was brought up stairs. 'What an exquisite little thing it is, and how nicely it will stand here between the book-case and the window! Now, my own dear mamma, you really must not look so grave. It can't come from Uncle Frederick, you know, because we gave him to understand that we did not want such a thing.' (Charles had had to frame some excuse about music being too much for the poor widow just at present, to account to his patron for her having left the instrument at the Hall.)

'No, Christie, it does not come from your uncle; but it may come from some one else from whose hands we are equally bound not to accept it. I am much afraid that the good rector, who, I am sure,

has no such sum to spare as this must have cost, has——'

'O, dear me, I am so sorry,' interrupted Christie with a disappointed look; 'how foolish of me. Of course, it is the rector. Who else would have thought of such a pleasant surprise for us? Yes, it is certainly he. However, as it can't be sent back to-day, there will be no harm in my just running my hands along it. Come; I will play you one of your dear old tunes, mamma—just one old tune, for the sake of auld langsyne.'

So she sat herself down forthwith, and played so tenderly—so very differently from that rattling off an air which so many of our young chignoned performers now aim at, under the name of 'rapid execution'—that Mrs. Blissett could not say 'Nay' to her playing another, and then another. She wept—the poor lady—but they were not tears of bitter sorrow; tears, rather, which

From the depth of some divine despair,
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,
On looking on the happy autumn fields,
And thinking of the days that are no more.

She was sorrowful, but not unhappy, as those who have no expression for their woe; and presently, as Christie went on with air after air, here and there singing a tender old song with a tender voice, that seemed as proper to her face as its perfume to a flower, the widow's face grew calm, and even bright. Her pain was fairly drowned in the sweet sounds.

In the midst of this, who should happen to 'just step in' but Mr. Charles Steen!

‘Did you ever see such a beautiful little piano? A present from that naughty, extravagant man, Mr. Mellish!’ exclaimed Christie. ‘So of course we can’t keep it. And yet I could almost cry at having to part with it. This last hour has been such a treat—has it not, dear mamma?’

‘It has been a great treat, my darling,’ answered the widow; ‘but we must learn not to treat ourselves at the expense of others.’

‘I am sure, dear Mrs. Blissett,’ said Charles earnestly, ‘that if the donor were here, he would already consider himself richly paid for his investment: and talking of treating yourselves, I hope you are not going to be so selfish as to stop playing, now I am come.’

So some more tunes—somewhat less touching ones—were played, to the visitor’s great satisfaction, until, in the middle of one of them, Christie suddenly stopped short with: ‘Mamma, what *shall* we do? Here’s that naughty, extravagant man coming up the lawn!’

It was indeed the rector himself; and as to swathing that piano in its body-clothes of matting (let alone putting on its unmentionables), before he could get up stairs, that was out of the question. Moreover, the strains of the music had already reached him through the open window, for he was clapping his hands and crying ‘Bravo, bravo!’ as though he had white kid gloves on—only a little louder than is usual at the Opera.

‘What magic music have you got there?’ cried he from beneath the window.

'Come up and see, you wicked man!' cried Christie; then turned to her mother with: 'How ever shall we make him take it back?'

But before she could make reply, the rector was in the room.

'Well, I must say it's charming,' exclaimed he, looking at the instrument, instead of the performer or the audience. 'But, upon my word, Mrs. Blissett, I had no idea you were such a prodigal! You would not allow your old piano to be brought across the road from one house to the other, and here you spend seventy guineas—for I am sure that never cost a penny less—upon a new one! However, it is a real beauty, and will, I doubt not, pay you excellent interest in the way of pleasure.'

'I did not buy it,' said Mrs. Blissett. 'It arrived here to-day, we know not from whom or whence; and indeed we thought——'

'That it had come from *me*?' laughed the rector. 'I do assure you, you are mistaken there. In the first place, I am not half so liberal as you would credit me for being; and secondly, while you had a piano of your own—yes, of your very own, Madam—at yonder house, I should not have dreamed of getting you another.'

'But who *can*, then, have sent it to us?' exclaimed the widow. 'Our friends in the county have been very kind; but I know how ill is the companionship of wealth and poverty, and I have steadily kept myself aloof from them; nor is anyone, that I know of, sufficiently familiar with us to know that such an instrument would be acceptable.'

'It's this young millionaire, then!' exclaimed the rector in a rapture. 'It's just the sort of abominable trick that he would like to be at.'

'O Mr. Steen!' cried the widow. ('O Charles!' cried Christie involuntarily; but in the excitement that ensued, the affectionate familiarity passed fortunately unnoticed, save by the ear for which it was intended.) 'This is really too bad—and too good—of you. To give away your first year's income in this way cannot be suffered.'

'I have experienced more pleasure within the last half-hour, my dear Mrs. Blissett,' said Charles quietly, 'than I have had during all my life before. If you broke that piano up for firewood, I have already had my money's worth of it; so, pray, do not speak of that. It was, however, a much cheaper toy than you imagine. Please to accept it, Madam, from one who, if he were indeed the millionaire that Mr. Mellish speaks of, could never, never repay you for—— Please not to return my little present, Mrs. Blissett,' added the young man suddenly with earnest pathos.

'So be it, Charles,' said the widow, deeply moved, and taking his hand in hers; 'and thank you kindly.'

'How very good of you, Mr. Steen,' said Christie, with moist eyes. 'We shall always think of you when we have our chamber-concerts.'

Mrs. Blissett had never before that occasion called him Charles, although her daughter, upon some of those river-excursions to which we have referred, had fallen into that sisterly habit. And thus that pleasant episode of the piano was happily ended.

Beside the water-trips which Steen and Christie

were wont to take in the summer afternoons, they sometimes carried their portfolios (for they could use their pencils) into the beech-woods, or to the pleasant pasture-lands round which the river wound, or even on the breezy downs, and sketched; and upon one of these occasions, a circumstance occurred in connection with a certain third person, which, although apparently trivial, became of such vast importance to the chief characters in this history, that it demands a chapter for itself.





CHAPTER XIX.

A LECTURE ON A SARSDEN STONE.



ALTHOUGH, as has been mentioned, the sketching excursions of Charles Steen and Christie had even extended to the lofty downland at a considerable distance above Allgrove, there was one spot upon the downs which offered more temptation to their pencils than any other, and yet had hitherto remained unvisited. It was several miles away (notwithstanding that it was part of the Morden property), and perhaps the distance made Christie hesitate to undertake an expedition which would necessarily cause her mother to be left at home alone for many hours. It was not certainly that she anticipated any objection from her, for although the village gossips held up their hands, and wondered at Mrs. Blissett's imprudence in allowing 'those two young people to be thrown so much together,' the widow herself by no means discouraged the intimacy. It is probable that so sensible a woman had her own reasons for this indulgence. She had the utmost confidence in Christie, while her regard for Charles had

grown by this time to be almost that of a mother for her boy. She was no longer rich, or occupying any high social rank, and perhaps her experience led her to attach a much smaller importance to such matters than is paid by folks who have never fallen through the thin ice of 'position' into the stream of real life. Or perhaps (and this idea would sometimes intrude itself upon Steen, and chill him to the marrow) she was paying the young man, as it were, 'on account' for a service which, whether he had promised to render her or not, she most certainly expected of him—albeit not a syllable had she spoken on the subject since that dread interview in December, and it was now early June.

The excursion in question was eventually proposed by the widow herself.

'Why don't you take Charles to the Druid Stones?' said she to Christie, as they were at breakfast one morning. 'He has never been there, has he?'

'No, mamma. But it's so far; and we did not like to leave you so long alone.'

'O, nonsense. I shall do very well, my dear. I will write and ask Mrs. Groves to lend me her little pony-carriage to-morrow; then Charles can drive you there and back quite comfortably. Be sure you call upon old Jem Templar. I have not heard of the honest fellow for these six months; he was the very last person, you know, about whom your poor dear father spoke, and I should much like to have news of him.'

So, the next morning early, a charming one 'in the front of June,' the two young folks set out for the

downs in the manner suggested ; the hind seat of the little carriage was occupied with their portfolios and a luncheon-basket, for, of course, Christie sat in front ; but as for Charles, if it had not been 'for the look of the thing,' he might almost as well have been on foot, since he had to walk up the whole mile-long hill, in consideration for the duodecimo pony. Once on the summit, however, they drove along at a trot over the same ground on which we accompanied the poor squire six months ago ; but the hard unyielding sod was now springy turf ; the nipping air was exchanged for the soft breath of summer, laden with fresh thymy scents and cheery sounds, with the fitful music of the sheep-bells, and the hurried yet so perfect notes of the unseen skylark ; while the fog that had hung around the doomed man (like that airy mantle which the gifted seer perceives around those whom death awaits) was nowhere to be seen, nor scarcely as much as a cloud in the clear blue vault of heaven. Below, the very world seemed stretched before them, so extensive was the view ; and above woods, and tower, and steeple stood out, more conspicuous than all, that cluster of funereal trees called Newnham Clump. As she pointed it out to her companion, how little did the young girl think that 'I shall soon see Newnham Clump' were her father's latest words ; not did she even know that under it, though hidden from them by the swelling upland, lay the scene of his death.

But the particular spot they had come to see was but little altered by variation of season ; its grand mysterious features were independent of storm or sunshine, wind or calm. As a man of the world, who

has reached the ordinary limit of human life, smiles contemptuously at the endless social pother he sees going on about him, these monuments of antiquity, that had watched the warring of the elements for unnumbered ages, stood silent, grim, unmoved, throughout the changes of the year. Perhaps by contrast with the growing green about them, the half-dozen trees in leaf, the sunshine that strove to mellow their gaunt looks in vain, the monstrous stones seemed even more weird and unnatural than in the wintry gloom: the few that still maintained their original proportions towered above the one or two mean cottages, as though contemptuous of the puny works of modern men; and those scarred by fire, and broken by irreverent hands, cast their jagged shadows for a curse upon the barren soil.

There was no green hill, as at far-famed Avebury, on which a visitor could mount, and mark the whole circle of their range, and note where here and there a pillar of the Past was missing; but, on the other hand, the spot was bare and open to the view: the area, too, was smaller; and Charles and Christie, having put up their quick-stepping pony in a shed adjoining Jem Templar's cottage, with a bag of corn hung round its neck for a reward—more appreciated than any collar of the Bath by human creatures—they circumambulated the entire 'village,' admiring each stolid stone like make-believe idolaters, or noting the green depressions which marked—like scars upon earth's face—the place whence it had been ruthlessly removed. It is doubtful whether any two members of the Archaeological Society, note-book in hand, ever

spent a morning among the Druid Stones, we will not say in a more improving manner, but, at all events, in one more entirely satisfactory to themselves. We do not say even that their talk was religiously confined to antiquities and the past; they were so far from antique themselves, that they may be excused if they sometimes conversed of the present and speculated on the future.

Their palæological duties performed, the young folks returned to Jem Templar's cottage, in the garden whereof stood, behind a row of beehives, which it sheltered from the north, one of the finest of these stone giants, which, after luncheon, they proceeded to sketch, while the proprietor of the little plot watched their proceedings close by, with an interest which, as the likenesses grew on the cardboard, became slightly mixed with awe.

'Well, now, that's downright wonderful, Miss,' said Jem approvingly, as Christie's dexterous fingers approached the end of their toil. 'It's like as like can be. I shouldn't wonder if Dr. Fungus (who I just see a-coming along the avenue there, as he calls it) was to object to your taking the book home with you, as likewise to this young gentleman's doing it. It's just carrying the stone away with you; and the doctor would send a poor man to prison for even chipping one on 'em up for a pigsty, if he had his way.'

Christie laughed heartily at this honest compliment, and turned her eyes to 'the avenue,' up which was plainly to be perceived a large blue umbrella jogging along upon a little horse. As these objects drew nearer, the doctor himself came into view between

them, with the white hat and blue spectacles, which were throughout all seasons as permanent institutions as were the Druid Stones themselves.

‘I hope I see you well, Miss Blissett?’ said he, a little stiffly, as though doubtful of his reception from that young lady; ‘and how are *you*, Mr. Steen?’ added he more more graciously. ‘Sketching, eh? I am glad to see young people with a love for antiquities. Now I shall be glad to lionise you over the whole place; and I think I may say without conceit, you will not find so good a guide in the county.’

The little doctor, who spoke nothing but the truth regarding his scientific knowledge, for it was both profound and extensive, shared the weakness for lecturing common to so many of his learned brethren. The idea of having a couple of young neophytes to introduce to the mysteries of archæology made his mouth water; he looked upon the youthful pair with no less satisfaction than an arch-Druid might have done upon a couple of tender victims awaiting the sacrificial flame in a wicker prison.

‘You are very good, Dr. Fungus; we have been all round the place already,’ said Christie simply.

‘All round the place!’ repeated the learned doctor, as though to convince himself he had heard aright. ‘I am afraid, young lady, you might just as well have stopped at home. To go “all round the place,” as you call it, properly, and in an intelligent manner, would take you six months at least. I dare say, now, you have not even observed that these stones are unhewn—a fact which at once establishes the priority of this temple in point of time to Stonehenge itself.’

'We did observe that fact, Sir,' answered Charles deferentially, his heartstrings tickled with secret mirth.

'And no great credit to you either, Sir,' observed the lecturer, displeased at the interruption, 'for only making use of your eyes. You know little or nothing, I will venture to say, about the respective merits of the Planetarium and Ophite theories. You are utterly unaware that you are now beholding the mystic union of the serpentine and solar superstitions. Bring out the ladder, Jem, and from the top of this stone I will point out to the young lady and gentleman the outlines of the Ophite Hierogram.'

'I am afraid mamma will be expecting us,' said Christie quietly; 'so you must excuse us to-day, Dr. Fungus: at another time, when we have more leisure, we shall be delighted to hear all about the Fire-a-gun.'

'The Hierogram!' explained the doctor viciously. 'Dear, dear, what ignorance! Why, Jem here knows more about it than that—don't you, Jem?'

'Well, I don't rightly understand the matter myself,' said modest Jem, scratching his head, 'though I'm sure it aint for want of your teaching, doctor. But what I do wish is, as I could pick up another ancient coin or two among these stones, like that as I took down to the Hall just afore your poor father died. Your good mother gave me half-a-crown, Miss, and promised to send me what it fetched if the thing turned out to be real silver; what I suppose it didn't, since I've heard nothing about it.'

'It was not likely to be silver, Jem,' observed the doctor testily; 'or if it were, it would be most probably an old crown-piece, that dropped here from some

visitor's pocket, and which you took for an ancient coin.'

'Nay, nay, doctor,' answered Jem resolutely. 'If we aint all larned folks like you, we aint born naturals neither, so as not to know good money when we sees it. That were no crown-piece as I found in yon potato-field. It were an ancient coin, I tell you ; and there was summut like a man and horse upon it—as it might be the doctor and his powny, only the powny had neither saddle nor bridle, and the doctor was without his umbrella and everythink else.'

Charles roared at this numismatic description ; while Dr. Fungus, who was slightly disconcerted by Jem's independence, turned to Christie, and inquired, in quite a subdued tone of voice, whether she was not of his own opinion with respect to the crown-piece.

'I did not see the coin myself,' said she, 'but poor papa thought it was a very curious one. Strangely enough, he had put it in his pocket, on that sad morning he started for Newnham, for the express purpose of showing it to you, whom he said he was sure to see at the meet.'

'You don't say so !' cried the little doctor, much excited. 'What a dreadful thing !' (He was alluding to the loss of the coin, and not of the squire). 'To be lost for ever, perhaps, just after its being seen for once in a thousand years ! Why, what on earth can have become of it ? It may be priceless, Ma'am. Who can have got it ? Confound it, Sir,' added he with violence, turning short round upon Steen, 'who *has* got it ? He's a thief, whoever he is. Did you hear what that young lady said, Sir ? It was meant for *me*.'

'Well, I have not got it, doctor,' returned Charles laughing; 'though, if I had, you should have it for the crown-piece you despise so much. I think we must be going, Miss Christie? Will you please to "put to" the pony, Jem?'

'Stay. Just place the ladder against yonder stone, Jem,' interposed the doctor. 'While the carriage is getting ready, my young friends, I can at least point out to you the principal features of the Ophite Hierogram.'

All three accordingly climbed to the top of the stone, which, large as it was, scarcely offered accommodation for so many persons; a slight wind had arisen, very sensibly felt at their present elevation, and, moreover, the two young people trembled with suppressed laughter, so that their situation was perilous as well as ludicrous in a high degree.

'Banish for a moment from your minds,' commenced the lecturer, 'all thought of the intervening ages, and place yourselves——'

'Stop a bit; I'm slipping,' cried Christie.

'Place yourselves in the far-back past——'

'You'll place me in the illimitable future, doctor, if you don't stand still,' said Charles. 'For goodness' sake, don't whirl that umbrella.'

'I'm not *whirling* it, Sir,' answered the doctor irritably: 'I am pointing—if you will pay me the favour of your attention—to yonder avenue. You are doubtless aware that all these Sarsen, or, more properly, Sarsden stones—of which there are supposed to have been originally three hundred and sixty-five——'

'For the days of the year?' inquired Christie, under

the impression she had made an intelligent observation.

‘Good Heavens ! what did the Druids know about our calendar, Ma’am ?’ said the doctor sharply. ‘Do you suppose they kept Shrove-Tuesday and Ash-Wednesday ? I say, it is evident enough that these Sarsden stones portray the course of the Serpent, and that the scene before us plainly symbolises Eternity. There is the coil, the tail, the head—My *hat*, my *hat* !’ ejaculated the little doctor at the top of his voice, as the white hat, lifted by a puff of wind stronger than common, rose gracefully into the air, disclosing its blue lining, and falling upon the sloping down, rolled merrily away at the rate of some six miles an hour.

Paralysed with mirth, his companions could offer no assistance ; and the lecturer, descending hastily from his rostrum, had himself to mount and ride bareheaded and blue-spectacled after his vagabond property. Nor was its recovery an easy matter ; for although he presently overtook it, his usually docile steed, alarmed at the revolving object which he had hitherto only known as stationary upon his master’s head, declined to approach it, and thus the chase continued until pursuers and pursued were hidden by the slope of the hill. The period of their return being so doubtful, and the opportunity of escape from archæology so tempting, Charles and Christie in the meantime set off home. They were delighted with their day’s trip, and promised themselves another visit to the Druid Stones as soon as practicable ; they planned this and that excursion of pleasure for the next day and the next ; fate seemed to have in store an endless chain of such

wholesome enjoyments. Is it not generally when one day is the prototype of its successor, and there is nothing to give hint of change, that the greatest vicissitudes of human life take place? just as on the most still and cloudless days the volcano bursts, or the earthquake 'smacks its mumbling lips o'er the thick peopled city.' It was long before Charles and Christie sought stream or wood, or down again in one another's company, nor, indeed, under the same circumstances, were they ever to do so more.





CHAPTER XX.

CONTAINS, AMONG OTHER THINGS, A PRESCRIPTION
FOR SUCCESS IN LIFE.

DIRECTLY the young folks saw Mrs. Blissett's face, they knew that something had happened of an unwelcome sort.

'There is bad news, Charles,' said she at once ;
'bad, at least, for Christie and me.'

'Then certainly bad for me, dear Madam,' said Steen gravely.

'Well, I fear it will be, my dear young friend. Here is a letter for you from Mr. Frederick Blissett.' (They had left home upon their excursion before the post came in, otherwise the calendar of their lives would have contained one white day the less.) 'And I know, in part, the contents of it, since he has also written to Mr. Mellish. You are getting too much attached, it seems, to us poor folks ; and you are to go away. Mr. Frederick Blissett (the widow always spoke of him thus, as though he were a younger brother still) 'has returned from abroad, and requires your immediate presence in town.'

White and silent, Charles took up the letter, while Christie, white as he, watched the expression of his eyes, as they rapidly hurried through its contents. There was not a ray of hope or comfort in them. 'It is quite true,' sighed he, 'dear Mrs. Blissett. I am to go. I have long expected this. I have felt that I was too happy here.' He glanced involuntarily towards Christie, but her face was turned aside, and even while he yet was speaking, she noiselessly left the room.

'I have long expected this, too, Charles,' said Mrs. Blissett. 'We have all our work to do—all, at least, whom God has not thought fit to lay his hand upon, as here, and render useless;' and she pointed to herself for an instant with touching pathos. '*Your* interrupted task'—she spoke with the utmost deliberation, and gazed upon him as though she were reading his very soul—'must now be resumed. There is no need to refer to it, I see.'

Perhaps she feared that the young man's strength of mind would again succumb, if she should adjure him with that earnest solemnity she used before; but if so she took an unnecessary precaution. The wholesome toils and pleasures of the last six months had done much to dispel the vague impression her former words had laid upon Charles Steen. He had ventured more than once of late to look the ghastly spectre of suspicion she had raised boldly in the face, and had pronounced it a mental delusion—as, indeed, on the widow's part at least, it undoubtedly was.

'Madam,' returned he earnestly, and not without a tinge of that severity in his tone (although he was pro-

bably himself unaware of its presence) which doctors use towards their refractory patients, 'it would be hypocrisy in me to pretend that I do not recognise the subject at which you hint; it would be worse, because more harmful than hypocrisy, not to tell you (what I ought to have said when you last spoke upon this matter) that your suspicions are baseless as a dream. You are doing, I am well convinced, the deepest wrong of which the human mind is capable; you are imputing a hideous crime of Cain—to a perfectly innocent man.'

'Ay, the crime of Cain,' repeated the widow slowly.

'Yes, my dear Mrs. Blissett, I love and honour you and yours more deeply than I can say—more deeply, perhaps, than I dare to tell you—but I have my duty to do in this matter.' (The widow shook her head with a sad smile.) 'No; do not mistake me, Madam. I do not mean my duty to my patron, but a higher, if more common one—that which is laid upon all honest men—namely, to speak the truth. I tell you, Madam, at the risk of your displeasure, you are doing, in your heart, a cruel and most grievous wrong. It is most painful to me to have to speak to you, my honoured friend and benefactress, such words as these; it would be more painful still—so distressing, indeed, to one in my peculiar position (as you must surely perceive), that I must positively decline to do it—to enter into any argument upon this subject: to name the name of him on whom your dreadful suspicions so unjustly rest, and to defend him as though he were a criminal arraigned.'

The young man spoke with uncommon vigour and

eloquence, for he not only felt deeply the necessity of remonstrance, but he had rehearsed this very scene, well knowing that sooner or later it must needs occur. The earnestness and confidence he displayed were not without their effect upon the widow. She changed colour once or twice while he was speaking; and the quiet smile of incredulity which had sat upon her lips when he began, had disappeared before he ended. She had raised herself upon her couch at first, as her custom was when excited, but now she lay back on her sofa-pillow in silent thought.

‘You are not angry, my dear Madam, I trust?’ observed the young man earnestly.

‘Angry, Charles?’ returned she, almost in a whisper. ‘No, indeed; I am not angry. I honour you for every word you have said. Angry? How far do you misjudge me! Why, helpless as I am, dear boy, Heaven knows I would gladly part with this poor right hand of mine, could I believe as you do. Widowed as I am—deprived of him who was more to me, much more than tongue can tell, and who, being torn away from my poor heart, has left an aching void there nought can fill—yet I say, if you could but convince me, as you *seem* convinced yourself’ (here she looked up a moment with the old glance of distrust and doubt), ‘I should almost be happy.’

‘I *can* convince you, Madam.’

‘What a fate is theirs,’ continued she, in the same low earnest tones, and apparently without having heard his observation, ‘who have the guilt of blood at their own doors! Who does not shun them! They would shun even my Christie.’

'Hush! Madam: be silent, if you please,' cried Steen. 'This is mere mad prejudice and wicked hallucination. What are your proofs?'

'Nay, what are yours, Sir?' cried the widow nervously. 'O, what would I give to be shown that I am wrong, nay, mad—to know that I have nourished evil in my heart against this man so long without a cause!'

'I ask for no reward, Madam; but my conditions are: first, that you will answer me one question; secondly, when you have received the proof which you desire, that this subject is closed between us for ever. Do you understand?—for ever.'

'Yes, yes; I understand,' cried the widow eagerly. 'If only you can give me proof, I will dismiss the dreadful thing, not only from my lips, but from my thoughts, as though it had been but an evil dream. But the proof—the proof!'

'Nay, Madam: first, the question. I ask, then, have you ever had any ground—the slightest—for the horrible suspicion you have so long entertained, beyond mere evil dreaming—that is, prejudice, distrust, and——' Charles hesitated.

'And hate,' observed the widow, quietly concluding his sentence. 'You may say that, for I did hate him. I confess, Charles,' said she solemnly, 'I have had no tangible grounds—lawyer's grounds—for this suspicion. But from the very first, a something—you may call it what you will—an instinct, a dread presentiment, took hold upon me! ay, and it holds me now.'

'Was this before the result of the inquest, Madam?'

'Yes; from the very first. But when I knew—as

you know, Charles, for you can't deceive me there—that my dear husband came to his untimely end by the hand of man : What man, asked I of my bruised heart, could have done so foul a deed, but one ? What man was my Frank's enemy, but one ? What man could reap a benefit by his death, and therefore seek to murder him, save one ?'

Once more she fell back on the pillow, gasping for breath ; but her eyes were rooted on the young man's face, and never left it for a moment. 'And now, your proof, your proof, Sir,' whispered she.

'It is a short one, dearest Madam, but very decisive. The murder of your poor husband—if murder it was—could not by possibility have been committed by the hand to which your suspicion points, for the simple reason, that no man can be in two places—in this case, miles away—at the same time. I know—I am as positively certain as one who was not witness of the fact can be—that at the hour your husband came to his sad end in Burslem Bottom, the man whom you are wronging by your doubts, was ill and in his own bed in London : I am absolutely certain of it.'

The intensity of conviction with which the young man spoke was such that the perspiration stood out upon his forehead ; but he showed no other sign of agitation, and met the widow's searching glance with a look as fixed and resolute as her own. The victory was his.

'God bless and reward you, Charles Steen,' cried she, bursting into tears—almost the first he had ever seen her shed. 'I have done my brother wrong.'

Steen had received some half-a-dozen letters from his patron during the six months the latter had been abroad, all curt and businesslike : nor was the present missive an exception in point of style :

‘180, GRAFTON STREET.

‘MY DEAR SIR,

‘I have returned to town some days, during which I have been engaged in house-hunting ; and at last have found a residence to my liking—the above address. Mrs. Maude will come hither from Clifford Street as my housekeeper. But I require you at once to superintend the removal of my things ; there are hundreds of letters, receipts, &c. to be looked through, and destroyed or retained as may seem proper. I am quite unequal to any mental worry of this sort. I also require your immediate presence for another reason, and shall expect you by the train which (if I remember rightly) leaves Harbrook at four o’clock. My kindest compliments to my sister-in-law, and love to my niece.

Yours truly,

‘FRED BLISSETT.’

It was impossible (it being already 3.30) that Charles should obey his patron in the matter of the four o’clock train, or indeed go up to town that night at all ; information which he despatched by telegraph forthwith. The time even then was short enough that intervened between the present moment and the hour of his departure by the next morning’s express ? short enough for even business arrangements connected with the Hall, and far too short for leave-takings with friends

at Allgrove. For was it not possible that he was never to visit that dear spot again? Never since the poor squire had been laid in his grave had so sad an evening fallen upon the little household at Rill Bank as that which they now passed; although Mr. Mellish came to dine and keep their spirits up, on this eve of parting with their common friend, with copious quotation from Shakspeare. It was mutually agreed that there should be no farewells in the morning with respect to the ladies (as to the rector, he insisted upon driving his young friend over to the station in his own little conveyance), so their good-byes at night were last adieux.

When the lad held out his hand to the widow, she said: 'Nay; stoop down, dear boy;' and kissed his cheek with her pale lips.

And when the rector was following him and Christie from the room, she signed to him to stop. 'The young folks may have a word to say to one another in private, Mr. Mellish; I am sure they feel this parting.'

'I shall miss the young dog myself,' said the rector, 'more than I care to show him.'

'You!' smiled Mrs. Blissett. 'Why, you carry your heart on your sleeve, as your friend Shakspeare writes. You have spoiled the boy more than any of us.'

'Pooh, pooh, Ma'am; I've done nothing of the kind,' answered the rector irritably, for he piqued himself on his freedom from all sentimental weaknesses. 'I have not hesitated to praise him when he has deserved it, but in his studies and conduct I have been a strict disciplinarian.'

‘You have indulged him in every possible way,’ reiterated the widow; ‘and you were quite right, for he is a thoroughly good lad. I love him as though he were my own son.’

‘That’s fortunate, Ma’am,’ replied the rector drily; ‘for if you allow him and Christie to make their adieux alone together in this way, in all probability he will be your son. I shouldn’t wonder if he had proposed to her already.’

“You had better go and see,” said the widow, with an imperturbable smile.

‘We are all bewitched with this young rogue’s company,’ quoth the rector in the words of his favourite Falstaff, as he did her bidding. “If the rascal have not given me medicines to make me love him, I’ll be hanged: it could not be else; I have drunk medicines.”’

But, happily, it is not necessary to use love-potions to win the affections of those of our fellow-creatures whose love is alone worth having; the best prescription is not to be found in the pharmacopœia, but among the homely recipes of the herbalist: and that which Charles Steen used was of the simplest sort, and found in every human hedgerow. It was made up of the following physical and moral simples: good looks, good taste, good manners, good will, and a good heart.’



CHAPTER XXI.

THE NEW VALET.

ON arriving in town, on the morrow, Steen drove at once to the address in Grafton Street; a large and handsome house, but with that atmosphere of aristocratic gloom about it, peculiar to the locality, which is apt to give common people the blue-devils. It had been hired with its furniture, just as it stood: perhaps the dark oak chairs and tables had pleased the new tenant's artist eye, though that could scarcely be said of the ceilings, whence hideous figures — the monstrosity of which may have been owing to the position of the decorator, who, as it seemed, must have stood on his head — threatened to fall; the ancient billiard-room, too, at the back of the house, had doubtless attracted Mr. Blissett, by reason of its capabilities for a studio, to which it was now in process of being adapted. The front-door was opened by an individual of such irreproachable appearance, a middle-aged personage, so utterly without any social expression (unless his black garments announced him to be in the undertaking

line), that Charles scarcely knew how to address him. Was he really a major-domo (footman he could never be), or was he a gentleman caller, who chanced to be leaving the house at the moment, and whose appearance as the visitor rang the bell was a mere coincidence? As he did not offer to move from the front-step, however, Charles ventured to ask him whether Mr. Blissett was at home.

'My master is not within just now, Sir,' was the reply, in the middle of which the speaker removed his hat with extreme haste.—'I ask your pardon, Sir: but the fact is, I was just going out when the bell rang, and forgot that my head was covered.'

'Don't mention it,' said Steen. 'Are you, then, in Mr. Blissett's service?'

'I have the honour to be his valet and confidential servant, Sir. But until his establishment is completed, I make myself generally useful; though I am afraid I have shown my incapacity for being his footman.'

Not a muscle of his countenance moved. Was it all a joke of this solemn man's? Certainly he spoke as little like a valet as he had acted like a footman.

'I am Mr. Steen,' said the visitor quietly. 'Take the luggage, please, and show me my room.'

'Ten thousand pardons, Sir: I ought to have known at once,' answered the valet, motioning the cabman to place the portmanteaus in the hall. 'There are no arrangements in the house, Sir, for your sleeping accommodation. I believe you are for the present to occupy your old apartment in Clifford Street. But Mrs. Maude is within doors, and will give you every information.'

The man's manner was respectful enough, and yet there was in it a vague something which was disagreeable. To Charles's perhaps over-sensitive ears, it seemed to say: 'You are no longer the only confidential personage employed by Mr. Frederick Blissett, young gentleman.'

But at this moment the door of the back dining-room (which was the new housekeeper's sanctum) was opened by that lady, and at her appearance the valet withdrew with dignity into his own region, which was in the close neighbourhood of the studio.

Mrs. Maude beckoned Charles into her parlour, with her finger on her lip.

'Did you ever set eyes on such a man, Mr. Steen?' said she, when she had carefully closed the door. 'O, how pleased I am to see you! Poor Mr. Blissett, I do believe, is going out of his mind!'

'What is the matter? Tell me all about it, Mrs. Maude.'

'Alas, I know scarcely anything, Mr. Steen,' said she hurriedly. 'I don't even know what to think. My master—for you know I am his housekeeper now—is so changed you would scarcely recognise him. He came home weeks and weeks ago—though you were not to be told—a mere shadow, skeleton! He has got something on his mind which is wearing him to a thread, which is hurrying him into his grave. And the presence of this Morris—valet, steward, Heaven knows what he is! keeper who watches a lunatic, I sometimes think!—makes him ever so much worse.'

'Did he bring this Morris with him from abroad, then?'

'No, Sir, I think not: although he was in this house before I came to it. The dreadful man will sometimes come and sit here—in my own parlour—by the hour, and talk to me. He talks about *you*, Sir, very often.'

'Talks about me? What does he know about me?' asked Charles with curiosity, and hardly able to repress a smile at the poor housekeeper's vehement yet frightened manner. All the starch of deportment wherein she used to pride herself above everything was quite gone: she was limp as a thread-paper.

'He doesn't know anything, but he wants to know a great deal. He tries to pump me, Sir, about *you*; and he is that clever, that I am sure he would have learned everything by this time, only, as you are aware, I had nothing to tell him.'

'Well, don't be alarmed, Mrs. Maude, upon my account,' returned Charles cheerfully. 'I assure you I think it's very flattering that Morris should interest himself so much concerning my affairs.'

'O, pray, Mr. Steen, don't talk like that,' cried the housekeeper, wringing her hands; 'it's not a matter to joke about. There is something very wrong somewhere; and I have had nobody to speak a word with about it until now. I've known Mr. Blissett these many, many years; he has been very good to me in his way; and I've a good salary from him—else, you may depend upon it, I would not stay in this house, as is more like a sarcofergus than a place for live people. And that reminds me, Mr. Steen, of one very dreadful thing. I put my hand to help in any way I could when I first came here, the house being

so short of servants ; and since I understood his ways so well, I took upon me to dust out master's studio. But he was very angry indeed when he found me at it one afternoon, and said I was a spy, like all the rest.—Only think of *my* being a spy !' said the old lady, drawing herself up with a touch of her old dignity.

'A spy !' exclaimed Charles, the remembrance of that very term having been applied to himself, and the recollection of a certain charcoal sketch flashing upon him simultaneously. 'That was ridiculous indeed. Did you see anything particular in the studio ?'

'Well, Sir, I did,' said the housekeeper, sinking her voice to the level of a sick-room whisper. 'I saw something very strange indeed. There was always a drawing of a face in charcoal—the same face, but not the same drawing ; for sometimes it was not nearly so advanced as at others ; he must have set to work at it every morning, and rubbed it out again at night. *That* was odd enough, you'll say. But whose face do you think it was, Sir ? Why, the face of Mr. Blissett the elder : you never saw him, but I had seen him twice, and recognised it at once : yes, Sir, the face of his dead brother, and with such an awful look upon it that it quite haunts me now.—Hush ! there's my master. For goodness' sake, Sir, don't say one word of what I have told you.'

There was the noise of a latch-key thrust hurriedly into the hall-door, and then Mr. Blissett's tread was heard in the passage. Steen went into the hall at once to meet him. His patron's appearance was indeed altered for the worse since they last met. His

eyes were more sunken; his cheeks thinner; his limbs, always frail, had lost flesh, as though he had just recovered from a long and serious illness. His tones sounded hollow and almost sepulchral in their gloom, as he greeted the young man, and held out his wasted hand.

'Well, Mr. Steen, you are come at last,' said he, leading the way into the dining-room. 'How are folks at Allgrove?'

'Quite well, Sir. Mrs. Blissett, I was to be particular to say, begged to give you welcome back to England. Miss Christie sent her most dutiful regards.'

'And *you*—I suppose you were overwhelmed with affectionate adieux?' observed the painter, with a rapid cross-fire of his deep-sunk eyes.

'They were kinder to me, Sir, throughout my stay, than tongue can tell,' answered Steen impressively.

'Ah.' There was a long pause, during which Mr. Blissett walked to the window, and stared through it, although there was not more to be seen than is usual in Grafton Street—namely, nothing.

'I do not know in what I have offended you, Sir,' said Steen respectfully, 'but I perceive you *are* offended.'

'Not at all, Sir,' replied Mr. Blissett, facing round. 'There is surely no offence in my relations preferring so pleasant a young gentleman as you to myself.'

'I hope my management of affairs at the Hall has not displeased you, Sir,' observed Steen, without noticing his patron's most embarrassing observation. 'Mr. Mellish expressed himself as satisfied.'

'Yes, Sir; that is all well enough. And if it were otherwise, what would it matter? You are now in an independent position.' This was spoken with great bitterness. 'You have an income of your own; why should you care for my displeasure?'

'Gratitude, as well as duty, Mr. Blissett, will always teach me, I hope, to please you whenever I can.'

'I may soon have to put that to the proof,' said the painter; 'then we shall see.' He hesitated for a moment: then held out his hand with frankness: 'I am ill, Steen; you must forgive my bitter words. The whole world is as the apples of the Dead Sea shore to me. My moods shift within me like the wind, and, like the wind, I find no rest. I cannot apply myself to anything—any sort of brain work. I have sadly wanted you of late to help me. There are heaps of letters to be looked over at the old place; nine out of ten to be burned, perhaps, but some to be preserved. You will have your own room in Clifford Street—it is but a stone's throw from here, you know—until that is done. As for me I can only paint. That is the one blessing for which I have to thank I am sure I don't know Whom. If Art does not help me, she is an ungrateful hussy indeed, for, for her alone have I lived, her alone have I served, her alone of all gods have I worshipped. Even the mention of her makes me quite sentimental, you see, Steen.' And he laughed that unpleasant and grating laugh, which is to a sneer what the full-blown flower is to the bud. 'By-the-bye,' continued he carelessly, 'talking of art reminds me of a matter in which I need your assistance—an oppor-

tunity for putting into effect that wish to please me which you have been so good as to express.'

'The sooner you make proof of that desire, Mr. Blissett, the better I shall be pleased,' said Charles earnestly, touched with his patron's evident mental dejection, in which indeed there was a something which seemed to border on despair.

'You shall be gratified at once, then—or at least to-morrow. You remember what I told you of the Heavenly Children out of Baker's Chronicle; the boy and girl that appeared in the reign of Stephen, clothed in green; who spoke a strange tongue, and when they were taught Norman, could tell nought of where they came from, except that they were of the land of St. Martin, where there were churches, but no sunshine?'

'I remember it well, Sir. The legend ran that the boy died, shortly after he was baptised, but that the girl grew up a wondrous beauty.'

'Yes. Well, I have seen just such a girl; the most *spirituelle* and lovely creature that ever walked the earth. I would give an hundred pounds to get her to sit for her portrait—as the Heavenly Child, you know.'

'And will she not do so? Is money no object to her?'

'Yes; she is poor enough—wretchedly poor. But her father, an old broken-down clerk in a Parisian House, one Mr. Joseph Bird, has scruples—insists upon some responsible person being in the studio at the same time. The fact is, I believe I frighten the old fool—though, for that matter, when I look in the

glass, upon my life I don't wonder at it. But Eloise is not frightened—her mother was a Frenchwoman, and hence her baptismal name—or, at least, she is willing to sit. Now, if you were to see this man, you might persuade him perhaps; if you were to tell him that you would always make a third in the studio. Do you understand?’

‘I shall be very glad to do my best, Sir, but I am afraid you overrate my powers of persuasion.’

‘Well, that's settled then,’ said the painter, a look of genuine pleasure crossing his countenance for the first time. ‘I see you have told the truth, then, about your wishing to please me; and in return I promise you this, you shall go to the university, and become a parson if you like; in those mourning clothes (which I must beg of you, by-the-bye, to continue to wear even in town, out of respect to my poor brother), you already look uncommonly like one of those nice curates whom the women make so much of; yes, I will allow you two hundred a year at Oxford.’

‘You are most kind, Sir, I am sure,’ exclaimed Charles gratefully; yet not without wonder at receiving so rich a promise of reward for the mere undertaking of so simple a task as his patron had proposed. ‘When shall I go to this Mr. Bird?’

‘To-morrow — to-morrow. I will be there this evening, and prepare them for your visit. I shall perhaps dine with them — for we are on the best of terms, this old gentleman and I, except that he won't do what I want him to do.’

‘Indeed, Sir. Is it possible that he supposes’—

Charles hesitated before he added—‘that you are a suitor for his daughter’s hand?’

‘You are forgetting yourself, Mr. Steen,’ said the painter with flashing eyes. ‘When I marry, Sir, I shall not choose for my bride the daughter of the ex-clerk of a Paris tradesman.’

‘Doubtless, Sir. I only suggested that this old gentleman on his part might have ambitious views.’

‘No, no. He understands. I offer a hundred guineas for ten sittings—for five, if he will not grant more; and you will of course make it plain to him that you will be present. There.’ And Mr. Blissett sighed a sigh of relief, as if at least one of the weights which oppressed his mind were for the present removed. ‘I have given orders about your meals and so on, at your old quarters, continued he in more careless tones; ‘just now, I take nothing but breakfast at home myself, so you must excuse my company. You will find the letters I spoke of in my old bed-room. I dare say you will need refreshment after your journey; so we will say good-bye until to-morrow, let us say at noon, for as you know, I do not sleep well now, and rise late.’ And Mr. Blissett grasped his young friend’s hand with a cordiality very different from the coldness of his first reception. Then nervously clutching the bell-handle, he woke a peal that filled the house. ‘Dear me,’ cried he, ‘I had forgotten. There is nobody to let you out. However, it is just as well that you should make the acquaintance of my new servant—a perfect treasure of a man.—Morris,’ said he, as that very superior person answered the summons, ‘this is my young friend, Mr. Charles Steen, of whom I have so

often spoken to you as possessing my fullest confidence. You will obey his directions, in my absence, as though they were my own.'

The valet bowed a respectful assent, opened the front-door, beckoned a cab, and assisted to place the luggage on the roof, with a condescension that was even more overwhelming than his previous solemn state.

But neither his patron's warmth, nor the affability of Mr. Morris, could remove from the young man's mind the impression, cut on it as with a graver's tool, that he was regarded with disfavour and suspicion both by master and man.





CHAPTER XXII.

THE LETTERS OF THE DEAD.



WHAT a contrast did that solitary evening in Clifford Street afford to those which Charles Steen had been accustomed to spend for the last six months by the snug hearth of the rector, or in the pretty little drawing-room at Rill Bank ! The house was in a transition state ; vacated by its former tenant, yet not taken possession of by the incomer. The carpets were all taken away ; a small table and a couple of chairs were all the furniture left for his accommodation in the dining-room. An ancient charwoman ministered to his wants. The studio looked inexpressibly bare and comfortless ; its skylight had got broken, after that miraculous fashion which happens to all uninhabited rooms, no matter how soon after they have become disused : a few broken chalks upon its floor alone proclaimed the purpose to which it had once been put. In Mr. Blissett's bed-chamber, a bulging, brown-paper parcel, lying in one corner, was the sole substitute for the elaborate furniture and gorgeous knick-knacks with which the painter delighted to surround himself.

His solitary dinner despatched, Charles carried this parcel into the parlour. It contained the letters which it was his task to peruse and winnow. There was an immense number of them—indeed, they comprehended the correspondence of years. The contents of some of them were more curious than edifying. Charles wondered to himself, as he read them, how any man, even so eccentric a personage as his patron, could suffer other eyes than his own to look at them. Perhaps Mr. Blissett had forgotten their existence; but if so, it only proved that very flagrant immorality was a matter with him of ordinary commonplace. There were a quantity of unpaid bills and threatening letters referring to them; and a very few receipts. There were letters addressed to him in India; and letters from India; and letters so recent as to be within a few months' date. But all were thrown together in a heterogeneous mass, with one exception. This exception was the correspondence of the late squire, which was tied together with a piece of red tape, each letter neatly docketed with its date, and the whole labelled, 'Letters from my Brother Frank.' Charles read the first, then gazed with hesitation at the rest of the little pile—the tone of the contents was so generous, so confidential, so fraternal! Was it possible that his patron had intended him to peruse even these? There was no need to sort them, for they were already sorted, and surely it could not be wished that he should destroy them! Mr. Frederick had bid him 'read over the whole lot, and separate the chaff from the grain; and you will find a deal more of the former than the latter.' Yet, were not these 'silent-speaking letters of

the dead' all grain and good grain? Upon the whole, the young man determined to deliver this little packet unread, and take the risk of the painter's displeasure. Accordingly, he restored that which he had taken out to its companions, and tied them all up again with the tape. As he did so, and in turning the little bundle over, the postal date of the most recent letter met his view. How he wished he had begun at that end of the pile! For this letter must needs have arrived on the very day before the writer's death, and had probably been written within eight-and-forty hours of it. How little he could have expected his end!

Charles took it up, and regarded it very wistfully. It was not mere curiosity, he reasoned, that was urging him to peruse it; the possibility of suicide—although it had been scouted by the rector as that of murder had been—had never (to himself, who had not personally known the squire) seemed totally out of the question. The contents of the envelope he held in his hand, with Allgrove on the Rill, November 9, on it, in circular print, would probably evidence the state of the squire's mind. It might show some cause for despondency, or exhibit some proof of aberration, of which nothing might have been known in his own household. It is so easy to find arguments for the course we wish to pursue.

He slowly drew forth the note—for it was but a few lines—from its cover, and read as follows:

‘MORDEN HALL, *November 9.*

‘MY DEAR FREDERICK—I cannot, I really cannot accede to your proposition. You say it is for the last

time; but you have said that so many, many times already. As a matter of fact, I have not the sum in question at my banker's, and I cannot consent to overdraw my account. Upon my honour, Frederick, I begin to think that sending you money is like pouring water into a sieve. If I was a bachelor, perhaps I might pursue even that course; but I have a wife and child. As to being surety for the other sum, it is a most unreasonable request: but you count upon me with confidence that is not misplaced when you ask, would I see my father's son in jail? Of course I would not.

'Refer this Mr. Ashden and his claim to my lawyer in Golden Square. I dare say the matter can be arranged; but what recklessness do you exhibit, my dear brother! To owe so much, and yet to have received so little! I write these remarks with great pain, believe me, and I hope—hoping against hope, alas—that they will never have to be repeated. There, I have done. Now, come down, my dear Fred, to us at Allgrove, and forget these matters. The hounds meet at Newnham, the day after to-morrow, at 10.30, and *I intend to be there*, if the frost breaks up, notwithstanding the distance; you, who are half an Asiatic, and used to rise before the sun, will not mind starting by the early train. You will find Robert at the *King's Head*, with the bay mare you always ride. He will see that your luggage is brought on all right; and you and I, after our day's run, will ride home here, where, as you know, a hearty welcome always awaits you from your loving brother,

'FRANK BLISSETT.'

This was the letter, then, to which Mr. Frederick had referred on the morning after his introduction to Charles, and which had preceded but by one day's post the tidings of the squire's death. What kindness it breathed, and what long-suffering patience! No wonder the painter had been so affected at the loss of such a brother!

Charles went on with his work, feeding the fire with many a proof of extravagance and dissipation, and setting aside one or two business documents, and acknowledgments of money paid upon account: but he came upon no other record of friendship or affection save those letters of the dead squire. It truly seemed that Mr. Mellish had spoken no more than the truth when he said that Mr. Frederick Blissett had never had a friend.

Long and wearisome as was the task, the young man did not rise from his seat until it was concluded, and night had given place to morning.

At noon he presented himself, according to his patron's directions, in Grafton Street, and found the painter only just sat down to breakfast. He was looking ill enough. Sleep, 'balm of hurt minds,' as the rector would have observed, had he beheld him, seemed to afford but small relief to Mr. Blissett; but he was in high, nay, what seemed in him uproarious spirits.

'You have brought me good luck, Steen,' cried he. 'What a fascinating young dog you must be, that the very mention of you even should have brought that ancient idiot—the father of the Heavenly Child—to reason! He says that now I have a respectable young clergyman staying with me——'

'A clergyman!' exclaimed Charles in astonishment.

'Well, you look so much like one, that nobody would ever know the difference; and I am sure this semi-Frenchman—and far less Eloise—never would. I only said so to quiet him. There can be no harm in such an innocent deception as that. It is the only way, I assure you, that I could possibly have obtained the sitting. Even now, he stipulates for seeing you. I will take you to their lodgings—such lodgings! a hundred pounds ought to be a fortune to them!—directly after breakfast.—What the devil are you looking so grave about?'

'I cannot, Mr. Blissett, I really cannot be a party to the deception at which you hint.'

'Deception! stuff and nonsense. You needn't enter into the joke at all—for it's only a joke of course—unless you please. You have only to look as glum as you are looking now (just as though you were going to preach too), to be taken for a boy-bishop.—What is that parcel you have got there?'

'Your letters, Sir—all those I thought you would care to have preserved.'

'And a good many more, I should think, Mr. Steen,' said the other laughing. 'Why, I hoped there would not be half-a-dozen worth keeping in all.'

'Nor were there, Sir—with the exception of your brother's correspondence; I thought you would not wish that to be destroyed.'

'And why not, Sir?' exclaimed the painter, darting an angry look at his young friend. 'What is there that I should wish preserved in those records of doled-out charity, of unwilling donations, or of down-

right churlish denial? You think all his excuses very fine, I dare say; everything that is said or done, or written by my relatives, dead or alive, finds favour with you, it seems; whereas I—your benefactor, your patron, without whom you would not have a shirt to your back—when I ask ever so small a service as I did to-day, am met with objections—scruples. Let me tell you, young man, although you have a hundred a-year of your own, you are not in a position to entertain scruples. You have read these high-souled letters, I suppose,’ added the painter contemptuously, flipping with his fingers at the little packet; ‘and it is to their influence, I presume, that I find you so desperately well principled this morning.’

‘I read but two of them, Sir. It seemed to me that they were of too private a nature for any eyes but those for which they were intended.’

‘You did, did you? What exquisite delicacy of feeling! Well, to me—so much do we differ—these letters—I don’t know what induced me to preserve them—are for the most part merely specious evasions; their contents, advice unsought for, and assistance denied. Do you know that this man and I were brothers, Sir? He with three thousand a year, and I with not as many hundreds. Was it unreasonable that I should ask his help whenever I needed it, although I had done so ten times as often as I did? No, Sir, no?’ He snatched up the packet, and threw it on the fire, and beat it down with his heel on the glowing coals in a transport of fury. ‘There let them burn.—I was not angry with *you*, Steen,’ added the painter coolly after a long pause, during which the

flame rose high and wavered and sank, and all those records of a brother's love were thin, black, eddying ashes, 'but irritated by a just sense of wrong. However, things have righted themselves since. It is better to be born lucky than rich, Steen, after all.'

There was something in his patron's tone so mocking, and even malignant, that the young man could scarcely repress a shudder; as it was, his countenance was unable wholly to disguise his inward feelings, but showed distress and pain.

'You look shocked,' said Mr. Frederick coldly; 'it's plain you have never been a younger brother. Well, this talk of ours has not improved my appetite for breakfast, and I can eat no more,'—he had but swallowed, as was his custom now, a few fragments of toast.—'Let us be off, and see my Eloise. Only remember this, my impressionable young friend, that, beautiful as she may prove, and doubtless in accordance with your taste, you are not to be her Abelard. I must have no gross and earthly affections excited in her innocent heart; otherwise she is spoiled for my model as the Heavenly Child. There is nothing like getting the genuine article in these matters. The artist that has my sympathies above all others is he who, setting about to portray the punishment of crucifixion, hired some fellow to be bound hand and foot, and then stabbed him, to get the exact expression of the features. The legend of King Stephen, by-the-bye, says the celestial children were dressed in green. I wonder whether green becomes Miss Eloise; and whether I shall persuade her to wear it if it doesn't?'



CHAPTER XXIII.

THE HEAVENLY CHILD.

YOU will not find my spirituelle Eloise with very spirituelle surroundings,' observed the painter to his young companion as he led the way out of Regent Street into that labyrinth of small and dingy streets that surrounds Golden Square. 'Here she deigns to lodge.' He stopped at a small dingy house, bearing no celestial sign of difference from its humble neighbours. The Heavenly Child did not even lodge on the first floor, but you walked straight out of the narrow passage into her angelic presence in the parlour. This was an apartment of no great size, and divided by folding-doors from what we may conclude (since they were always kept shut) was a sleeping bower. The gloom within was excessive, and shadowed everything so deeply, that the furniture (which was indeed yellowing with age) seemed to be all of one tint, a tan that was turning to black. Curtains, table-cloth, chairs, and sofa, all partook of this melancholy colour, and had been chosen in the worst

lodging-house taste, to begin with. In curious contrast to these were the brightness and elegance of the ornaments of the apartment, which, it was evident, had not been supplied by the hands that provided the essentials. A gilded cage, built to represent a miniature castle, occupied a large space, and within it a splendid parrot was at that moment descending head foremost from the roof with stately deliberation. Upon the mantel-piece was a French clock, of charming design, and on either side of it a small vase, which, if they had not cost much money, showed an exquisite taste in their selection. On the table stood a third vase, with a most magnificent bouquet of flowers in it, such as even at that period of the year must have fetched a great price in Covent Garden. This last, however, as Charles at once concluded, was the gift of Mr. Frederick Blissett.

The two occupants of the room, like its ornaments, seemed strangely out of place there. An old man, doubtless an invalid, lay on the sofa, constructing artificial flowers in wax ; a beautiful specimen of which delicate art adorned each of the two jars already mentioned. It was easy to see that he was not what we in England denominate a gentleman, yet his appearance and manner were very far removed from the sort of vulgarity that haunts the vicinity of Golden Square. The other tenant of the apartment was a young girl of singular and refined beauty, who sat by her father's side, with a handsome and elaborate concertina in her lap, from which she had just evoked some touching melody, whose echoes were yet lingering in the room as the visitors entered.

‘Pray, don’t disturb yourself, Miss Eloise,’ exclaimed the painter admiringly, as the girl hastily rose from her chair, with a flush upon her delicate cheek.

‘Mr. Charles Steen—St. Cecilia ; I mean Miss Eloise Bird.’ Then striding forward to the old man, who was gazing fixedly at Charles, he said something hastily in his ear.

As we are well aware that Mr. Steen’s young affections were not disengaged, it will give an idea of the surpassing loveliness of Miss Eloise to say that he at once awarded her the palm of beauty above every face he had ever beheld. It was not only that her features were faultless, and her wealth of golden hair a dowry he had never seen on woman’s head ; but her expression was so sweet and winning, so trustful and innocent, so uncommon and ethereal. He allowed to himself at once that the painter had chosen in her the fittest model in the world for the subject he designed to portray. Eloise cast down her beautiful eyelids under the young man’s gaze, which, though not otherwise than respectful—and, indeed, it expressed a certain reverent homage—was rapt and earnest.

‘The danger to your dove, if there be any, will be there, Sir,’ whispered the painter to Mr. Bird with a smile ; ‘for in this country, you know, it is allowed to priests to mate.’

‘A priest ! He looks very young ; not twenty, I should have thought,’ murmured the old man.

‘Hush ! nothing would annoy him so much as to hear you say so. His youthful looks have often been the cause of ridicule. When he gets to my age, he will be glad enough to wear them, we may be sure of

that.—Steen, let me introduce you to Mr. Bird. What I want you to assure him is that you live with me in Grafton Street, and that in case Miss Eloise is so good as to condescend to sit to me, you will always be present—for the sake of decorum, it seems—in my studio.'

'Most certainly, Sir, if you wish it,' replied Steen.

'But I *don't* wish it,' laughed the painter (and more carelessly than Charles had ever heard him); '*I* think the arrangement very ridiculous: it is Mr. Bird who wishes it.'

'Yes, it is I who wish it,' said the old man, regarding Steen with searching looks. 'I would hear you promise with your own lips, in case I permit my dear daughter to sit to your artist friend, that you will always be present.'

'I promise that cheerfully, Mr. Bird.'

'Very exacting, is he not, Miss Eloise?' said the painter, with a laughing look at the young girl. 'I wonder what Mr. Steen would have said, if your father had asked him *not* to be present.'

But Eloise did not hear, or at least pay any attention to, this remark. She had stooped down with a bright smile to kiss her father and whisper something in his ear.

'Yes, yes,' replied he tenderly; 'I dare say it is so, Eloise.—Well, Mr. Blissett, I consent, then,' added he with a sigh. 'It is a large sum which you offer, and will doubtless be useful to us.—Not that we are very poor people, you would say, Mr. Steen.'—Charles was glancing from the Parisian clock to the parrot-cage with some such thought in reality passing through his

mind, and the remark brought the colour rushing to his cheeks—‘but the fact is, we have been richer. When I was in full work, and not as you see me now, I had a good salary. We had everything then very nice about us. Service, however, is no inheritance, as the proverb says. Nevertheless, we are not beggars, Eloise and I, you will understand.’

‘Beggars!’ ejaculated the painter merrily; ‘well, I hope not, indeed. Though, if it were so, what a picture would your daughter make as the bride of King Cophetua!’

In robe and crown, the king stepped down,
To meet and greet her on her way,
“It is no wonder,” said the lords;
“She is more beautiful than day.”

I protest, I never pay a visit to Mr. Bird without glean-
ing some artistic idea.’

‘I say we are not beggars, young gentleman,’ continued the old man, only noticing the interruption by a certain increased stiffness and pride of tone; ‘and I wish you to know that it was Mr. Blissett who asked of me, and not I of him, that this arrangement of the five sittings should be entered into.’

‘Not five, Mr. Bird; if you will not say ten, let us say seven,’ put in the painter pleadingly.

‘These five sittings,’ reiterated the invalid firmly, ‘are to take place in your presence, Mr. Steen, and I understand you to have passed your solemn promise that they shall do so. It is so, is it not?—Thank you. There ought to be no sort of concealment about this matter, and therefore I tell you that Mr. Blissett

undertakes to pay twenty pounds on each occasion. It is purely a business arrangement from first to last.'

'For divesting a subject of all romance, Miss Eloise,' said the painter, shrugging his shoulders, 'I know of no such remorseless hand as your good father's.'

'There is no romance in this matter whatsoever,' pursued the old man, still addressing himself to Charles. 'Mr. Blissett made my daughter's acquaintance by accident; was so kind as to assist her in some little embarrassment in the street—she had lost her purse, and he paid her omnibus fare for her—accompanied her home, and has furnished me with the most excellent references as to his position and character. Otherwise, it is not my daughter's profession to sit to artists; and these five sittings will be her last.—They will take place,' here he turned towards the painter, 'between two and four, on any week-days within the next fortnight which you may choose to name, Mr. Blissett. I think there remains no more to be said upon the matter?'

'Nothing indeed, Sir. I congratulate you upon your exhaustive treatment of it. It is plain you have great talents for business, Mr. Bird.'

'I have been a plain man of business all my life, Sir,' was the cold reply.

'Shall we say next Monday at two, then?' asked the painter, 'and afterwards on alternate days. Will that be agreeable to Miss Eloise?'

'That will be *convenient* for her, Mr. Blissett,' returned the other, with a slight stress upon the change of adjective. 'The arrangement is therefore now complete.'

It was impossible to affect unconsciousness of this second hint that the departure of visitors was desirable, and Mr. Blissett rose to take his leave.

‘On Monday next at two, then, we shall hope to have the honour of seeing Miss Eloise in Grafton Street.’

The old man nodded. ‘Good-morning, gentlemen,’ said he, and resumed his employment with a deep sigh.

Eloise held out her small white hand, delicate as egg-shell china, to Steen frankly enough ; to his patron (as Charles thought), with a certain hesitation, which, however, was not coyness : it was plain that, upon the whole, she was pleased the matter had been thus arranged. The old man, on the other hand, wore a look of misgiving ; it seemed as though he already reproached himself with having given way to importunity. His fingers trembled visibly, and as the door closed behind his visitors, an exquisite lily of the valley, which he was manipulating, snapped in twain.

‘Dearest papa, what *have* you done?’ cried the young girl.

‘An imprudence, my child,’ responded he, with a shake of his head ; ‘yes, indeed, I fear so.’

‘But the flower—the lily, papa? I never knew you to be so careless : it is broken.’

‘Yes, Eloise. That also is a bad omen.’

The young girl turned pale and shuddered. ‘Don’t talk like that, dear papa—pray, don’t.’ For Eloise was superstitious.



CHAPTER XXIV.

AT THE WIZARD'S.

ELOISE BIRD kept her appointment ; she appeared in Grafton Street on the Monday, exactly on the stroke of two, and was ushered into the studio by Charles Steen, who had been watching for her for some time, agreeably to the painter's directions, and had opened the front-door to her before she could ring. Perhaps Mr. Blissett was a little apprehensive of his former landlady, who had always set her face (and with not an agreeable expression upon it) against the admission of female models under her roof ; but at all events the Heavenly Child was smuggled into the house under a sort of nimbus of secrecy, which seemed to Steen unnecessary, and under the circumstances injudicious. Eloise, unconscious of his precaution, thanked him warmly for his courtesy. 'I should have been afraid of your footman,' said she smiling. 'I could never have told him that I had come to sit for a fancy portrait.'

She was indeed a little nervous, but still in excellent

spirits. When the sitting was half over, and Mr. Blissett asked her how she liked it, she broke into a merry laugh.

‘Like sitting still and being stared at? Well, I confess it is a little tiresome, Sir, but, as I tell dear papa, it is light work for which to get ten pounds the hour. I think to myself all the time, what comforts I am procuring for him. That makes the labour—if one can call it labour—very sweet.’

The old mocking look came for an instant into the painter's face, but it gave place to an admiring smile as he replied: ‘What a good daughter you must be! And they say that a good daughter makes a good wife.’

Eloise blushed for herself, Charles for his patron. Yet it must be confessed that it was not the painter's habit to make people uncomfortable by blurting out such unseasonable remarks. It was easy to see, indeed, that Mr. Blissett was not himself. The very portrait at which he was at work showed that, in its timid indecisive touches, so different from his usual bold free style. He had spoken hardly at all throughout the sitting, indeed, so little, that Charles had been compelled to converse with the young girl, to avoid an embarrassing silence.

‘But you must let me see you home, Miss Eloise,’ said the artist nervously, as some neighbouring church-clock struck four and his sitter rose to go.

‘I can take good care of myself, thank you, Mr. Blissett,’ answered she, not quite forbiddingly, but as one who states a matter of fact.

‘But you have no objection to my escort?’

'None whatever ; on the contrary, if your way lies my way, I shall be glad of your company.'

'It does. I have to transact some business in Golden Square,' rejoined Mr. Blissett with the deliberation of a professional perjurer. And artist and model accordingly went forth together.

Charles, contrasting what he had always observed in his patron with his manner upon this occasion, thought it very strange. But he was fated to be more astonished yet. On the Wednesday, when, as had been agreed upon, the three met again, Miss Eloise let fall a remark by which the young man's quick ear detected that his patron and she had met upon the previous day ; that is, on the Tuesday, which was not in the bond agreed to by her father. Of course, this was no concern of Mr. Charles Steen's ; and a week ago, perhaps he would not have thought seriously about it ; but since he had been employed to winnow Mr. Blissett's correspondence, the character of that gentleman had suffered considerably in his opinion, and most of all as regarded his relations with the fair sex. He would affect in the young girl's presence a generous and high-souled tone of thought, such as it was habitual with him to ridicule and despise. He would pretend to naturalness and candour, which were utterly foreign to his character. He would refer, whenever opportunity offered, and very often when it did not do so, to his own wealth and position (so superior to those of artists generally), and to the social advantages they afforded—subjects to which he had never alluded before. In short, it was evident to Steen—himself a lover—that Mr. Frederick Blissett

was taking the course which *he* at least considered most adapted to gain his ends as a suitor for the hand of Eloise Bird. In the case of so lovely and fascinating a creature, such an attachment would by no means — notwithstanding the great difference in social position between them—have seemed out of the question, even if it had pointed at marriage. But the words of his patron, and the look with which they were uttered, recurred to Steen's memory: 'When I marry, Sir, I shall not choose for my bride the daughter of the ex-clerk of a Paris tradesman'—and he felt that Frederick Blissett had no intention of making Eloise Bird his wife.

The most ugly part of his conduct, so far as Charles observed it, lay in his attempts (though these did not take place till later) to make her compromise herself—to place her in situations, not harmful in themselves, but open to injurious comment. For this, her ignorance of English life gave him ample opportunities. There could be no harm in her doing this and that, he said, and in going hither and thither under his escort. Whether she consented in other instances, Charles could not tell, but the following example came under his own eyes. The conversation during a certain 'sitting'—it was the last one of the five—happened to turn on Spiritualism, a subject about which the town was then getting a little tired, but which was quite new to Eloise, and she greedily drank in the wonders with which the painter (who of late had found his tongue) regaled her ears.

It so happened that he and Steen had recently spent an idle hour in mystic communion with a certain

fashionable Rapper, and they had discussed the matter afterwards, so that the young man was in possession of his patron's genuine sentiments upon this subject ; great, therefore, was his astonishment to hear Mr. Blissett now express considerable belief in the professional exponents of the spirit-world. The young girl was as eager a convert as a listener. How she should herself enjoy an hour's talk with one of these gifted personages.

'That is easily done, Eloise,' said the painter ; 'I will take you myself to one of them ; and this very afternoon, if you please.'

'But papa will be expecting me. He was annoyed the other day, when ——' Here she blushed and stammered, and Charles thought he could make a guess at the purport of the missing words. His patron and Eloise had met somewhere alone, since the last sitting.

'Let us go *now*, then,' broke in Mr. Blissett. 'Let us spend the time with the seer that was to have been passed in the studio. If you do thus give me a sitting the less, what does it matter *now* ? We never forget a face when it is graven on the heart.'

Eloise blushed deeply, though she affected not to hear him.

'I should certainly like to go,' said she doubtfully. 'Do you think there would be any harm ?'

'Certainly not. Why should there be ?' asked Mr. Blissett impatiently.

'What does Mr. Steen say ? Will he be so good as to accompany us ? Then I am sure there will be no harm,' added the young girl winningly.

Affecting not to perceive the unmistakable 'No' which his patron was framing with his lips and eyes, Charles at once expressed his willingness to join the expedition. He even added, to anticipate more articulately spoken objections, should such be made, that since he had promised Mr. Bird to keep them company during two and four upon certain days, he should deem it his duty to do so, whether such time was passed in the studio or out of it.

For this remark, Eloise rewarded him with a bright and beautiful smile, and Mr. Frederick with as dark and ugly a scowl. But the painter made no further opposition to the arrangement.

'Shall we go to A. or B.?' said he, naming two distinguished professors of the occult art. 'I know them both well, and we shall be sure of getting a good séance.'

'I would much rather go to one with whom you are unacquainted, Mr. Blissett,' said Eloise with unusual earnestness; 'I should think there was less chance of deception, if ——'

'If I had nothing to do with it, eh?' interrupted the artist, with one of his forced laughs. 'Upon my life you are very pleasant to-day, you two, with your suspicions. However, you shall go to whatever wizard you have a fancy for, Eloise. It is all the same to me. Come, who shall it be?'

'I pass the door of one every day,' said Eloise—'of a clairvoyante who, for seven-and-sixpence, undertakes to do all that the greatest masters of spiritualism can effect; and I can't tell you how I have longed to pay her a visit.'

'Telegraphic communication always kept open with the spirit-world for three half-crowns!' cried the painter gaily; 'that is cheap indeed: we shall have some Rowland Hill proposing a penny tariff next. A magicienne, too! That's ever so much better than a male wizard. An angel to begin with (as she doubtless is), she naturally finds it less difficult to establish friendly relations with the other world.'

'Then you don't believe it, after all!' said the young girl with a disappointed look. 'You have been only laughing at me!'

'I believe in the science, but not in all its professors, Eloise. We must not be too credulous. We shall see in the first five minutes whether she is an impostor or not. If she is a true spiritualist, she will show us some marvel, you may be sure, before that time.'

'I do so long to see it,' murmured Eloise in low and almost reverent tones, 'and yet I am so frightened.'

In this most admirable frame of mind for a spiritual séance, the young girl started on the expedition, accompanied by her double escort.

The medium of whom they were in search resided in a narrow thoroughfare leading out of Regent Street, and used almost solely by foot passengers. The announcement of her calling was made upon a large brass-plate, which covered so much of the little door that it looked like a cuirass—'Miss Angeline Quailes, Clairvoyante.'

The dirty face of the thin servant-girl who opened the door beamed with pleasure at sight of the visitors; three at a time was a rare haul, and perhaps the payment of her wages depended upon the fish that came

into her mistress's net. They were ushered into the little dining-room, where there was hardly room for them and the table. 'Miss Quailes would see them in a few moments, as soon as the fire had burned up in the back-parlour.'

'What *can* she want of a fire?' said Eloise.

'It is a cold day for the time of year,' said Mr. Blissett, with an expressive glance at Charles.

Eloise regarded the wretched room and its grimy furniture with genuine awe. If it was not the actual bower of the enchantress, it was next door to it: if it was not the rose (and it certainly did not smell like it), it was near the rose.

Presently, they were ushered into the back-parlour, where a cheerful fire was burning. The largest woman that the visitors had ever seen (out of a caravan) advanced with elephantine tread to receive them.

'Good-morning, lady and gentlemen,' said she. 'This is my daughter Hangeline. You are fortunate, for she 'appens to be in particular good condition for communicating with the sperrits this morning.'

The statement was certainly true with regard to the young lady's condition, for she was amazingly plump, and also as respected their relationship; Miss Angeline was the image of her mother, and bade fair in time to rival her in height and proportions. She sat at a little round table close to the fire, and maintained a mysterious silence; but Mrs. Quailes was eloquence itself.

'My daughter, lady and gentlemen, don't pretend to 'ave no power over the sperrits. She is merely a hinstrument. It's a gift, you see. I aint a got it myself, and I don't lay claim to it. It's all a mystery.'

Will your daughter answer any question I put to her?' inquired Eloise timidly.

'I can't tell, young lady; she might, and she mightn't. —Hangeline, see if there are any sperrits about the place this morning. If there is, young lady, you will hear them quick enough, I'll warrant.—There, there!—they're all over the room, you see.'

And, indeed, several distinct 'raps' made themselves heard before she had done speaking—noises like the muffled snapping of fingers; but to an attentive and discerning ear, they were not 'all over the room,' but proceeded solely from the neighbourhood of Miss Angeline.

'How very curious,' said Eloise, trembling excessively.

'Ay, it's a mystery indeed,' ejaculated the old lady. 'Take your seats, please, round the table. You sit by me, Marm, and the young gentleman next to Hangeline; then the circle will be complete, and the odds is as we shall git a manifestation.'

Charles, hardly able to restrain his laughter, took his seat by the stout clairvoyante, than whom no less spirituelle young person could possibly be imagined; but she had long black hair and large black eyes, which, we dare say, formed a source of attraction to male devotees. Then all five, obeying Mrs. Quail's instructions, laid their hands upon the little table, the fingers of each touching those of its neighbour.

'Do you feel the sperrits?' inquired the old lady after a solemn silence. 'Do you feel a tingling of the fingers, and a somethink a running up your arm?—I do.'

'I do feel something of the sort, now you mention it,' said Eloise hesitatingly, and growing very pale. 'How very strange!'

'O, it's a mystery,' wheezed the fat old lady. 'I've seen things happen here (when Hangeline is in rappare, as they calls it) enough to curdle your blood. — Gadamercy! cried the old lady suddenly, affecting to jump up from her chair (only that was impossible).

'What *is* the matter?' cried Eloise.

'O, it's only the sperrits, young lady. That's always how they take *me*; they nips me as sharp as sharp.—Would you like to ask any questions, Missie? Then here's the halphabet.' She put into her hand a dirty piece of cardboard, on which the alphabet was painted in immense characters, and also a pencil. 'You point to the letters, one arter the other, and the sperrits will spell out the answer — leastways, if they're that way inclined. It's a mystery, you know.'

'Well, I want them to tell me what my name is.'

'O, you needn't have asked out loud, young lady. If you 'ave the question in your mind, that's quite enough.'

'Still,' put in Mr. Blissett, with a smile of incredulity, 'I suppose having done so does not invalidate your daughter's power?'

'Hangeline is no himpostor, Sir, if that's what you're a-driving at,' said the old lady, drawing herself up. 'Nobody but them as is pure in 'art and honest as the day can 'old intercourse with the sperrits at all.'

'Let them spell out the lady's name, then,' said

the painter impatiently, looking at Eloise with significance, as though to warn her against imposition.

The girl took the pencil in her hand, and pointed to each letter in turn; when she got to E, there was a loud rap beneath the table.

‘The sperrits say your name begins with a He,’ said the old lady.

‘It is wonderful,’ murmured the young girl. Then she began again for the second letter, and the rap was given at L.

‘That’s a Hell!’ cried Mrs. Quailes. ‘Your name begins with He, Hell.’

‘Well, it’s easy enough to guess the rest,’ observed the painter brusquely. ‘When we know that a young lady’s Christian name begins with an E and an L, we may conclude, without the aid of spirits, that it is Ellen——’

‘But it’s *not* Ellen, you know,’ interrupted the young girl simply.

‘There, now! you’ve spoilt it all,’ exclaimed Mr. Blissett in an annoyed and injured tone. ‘They would certainly have said it was Ellen, but for your telling them.’

‘I have told them nothing,’ replied Eloise earnestly. ‘I only wished to be fair. They have already done something that is very curious, and if they finish as they have begun, it will be quite incomprehensible to *me*, I’m sure.’

‘Well, they have told us *something*, I confess,’ returned the painter grudgingly.—‘Now, go on with the third letter. I will answer for it they make a mess of that.’

But the spirits rapped out O, I, S, E, without the slightest hesitation.

'It is most wonderful,' murmured Eloise to her neighbour in awe-struck tones; 'is it not, Mr. Blissett?'

'I confess it's curious,' answered he musing—'very curious.'

'Perhaps the young gentleman would like to ask a question?' observed Mrs. Quailes.

'No, no,' interrupted the painter hastily; 'we have come here on this lady's sole account, and we have no time to spare.—She feels, Miss Angeline, that you have shown her something strange; her Christian name was not an easy one to guess. But can the spirits tell her her surname?'

By a very decided knock, the spirits announced that they could even surmount that difficulty.

'Very good,' said the painter. 'I would rather, however, that some one less impressionable—may I say at once less credulous—than this lady has shown herself to be, should make trial of your skill this time.'

'The gentleman may ask the question himself, Hangeline, mayn't he?' inquired the old lady.

'I wish, then, to know the surname of this young lady,' said the painter impressively, taking the pencil in his hand, and beginning the alphabet as before.

B, rapped out the spirits tumultuously, as he reached that letter.

'So far so good,' said the painter, with a smile at Eloise. 'Do not, however, let us say "Yes" or "No" until the word is finished.'

L, I, S, S, E, T, T were rapped out in succession.

'Blissett!' exclaimed the old lady; 'ah! that's the name, I'll warrant.'

'But it's *not* the name,' observed Eloise, blushing violently, 'nor anything like the name.'

'It's very curious, though,' whispered the painter. 'More curious, it seems to me, than if they—or whatever it is—had guessed it right.'

'Sometimes,' observed the fair clairvoyante, breaking silence almost for the first time, and speaking in a voice of stage solemnity, 'the spirits to whom I am subject will not answer as it seems to us they should. When we are thinking of the Present, they are divining the secrets of Futurity.'

'Just so,' said the old lady approvingly; 'it's all a mystery, Hangeline; that's it.'

'Then you mean to say,' inquired the painter anxiously, 'that although Blissett is not at present the lady's name, it very probably will be so?'

'Her married name will certainly be Blissett,' responded the oracle profoundly.

Eloise turned deadly pale. 'I am not well,' pleaded she; 'I wish to go home—Mr. Steen will see me home,' added she hastily. 'Papa will be expecting me.'

The visitors rose, and a cab was procured at once. It was probably the best paid, because the shortest, séance, which Miss Angeline Quailes had ever given. Mr. Blissett and Charles left Eloise at her own door (it was evident that she was in no state to do the honours to company), and walked together towards Grafton Street.

'Did you ever see such a couple of dull impostors as those two fat women?' ejaculated the painter laughing. 'Why, I could set up for a spirit-rapper myself, if I were sure of customers as gullible as poor Eloise. She stopped at all her letters as positively as the learned pig used to do, so that Miss Angeline could not possibly go astray. I was afraid of her making a shot at "Ellen," however, so I put her on her guard.'

'Yes, I saw that,' remarked Charles frigidly.

'Of course you did, and also that I spelled out Blissett, so that there could be no chance of a mistake *there*. If I had not played so resolutely into the fat fool's hands, she would certainly have made a fiasco of the thing. The whole deception was as clear as glass. The maid telling us so plainly that we must wait for the fire to burn up—of course that Miss Angeline's great toe should become sufficiently warm and supple for rapping. Then that delightful old lady whom "the sperrits" nipped "as sharp as sharp." It was better than a play.'

'I am afraid it may have a very serious effect upon Miss Eloise,' observed Charles gravely. 'If I had known what you were about to do, Mr. Blissett, I plainly tell you I would not have assented to such a proceeding.'

'Stuff and nonsense. Don't give yourself such foolish airs, young gentleman,' answered the painter angrily.

Then, more quietly, he added; 'I like Eloise as well as you do, and a great deal better too, and I know her better. She will laugh at it all as

much as either of us, when I tell her how it was done. It was a most capital joke. "Your married name will certainly be Blissett," said that fat liar, as grave as a judge. That was the only really clever thing in her whole performance.'





CHAPTER XXV.

STEEN DECLINES TO READ ALOUD.

THE five sittings had been sat; the Heavenly Child (who had not been persuaded to dress in green—‘That being unnecessary, because it is her natural colour,’ as the artist had observed with his unpleasant laugh)—had been transferred to canvas; and yet Steen could not persuade himself that Mr. Blissett had seen the last of his model. In his letters to Allgrove, even in those to Mr. Mellish, Charles made no mention of her. It was a subject which he felt must be avoided, and out of which evil was yet to come. But he saw no occasion to keep the new valet out of his correspondence, and he did make merry with that stately personage. ‘His august presence,’ wrote he to the widow, ‘deepens the aristocratic gloom of our new mansion; he is condescending to me, but yet not affable. He perceives the enormous gulf between a gentleman’s gentleman and a young person like myself, who is merely a casual

dependant, and I dare say he is aware that I was once a casual in the workhouse sense. He does me the honour to watch me very closely, and I have reason to suspect that he considers Mr. Blissett's confidence in me somewhat misplaced. But then it must be allowed that he has little or nothing else to do than occupy himself with my affairs. As a valet, as Mrs. Maude observed, without intending any pun, I am sure, "he is of no valley whatever."

About a week after the visit to the clairvoyante, the workmen who had been employed to make some alterations in the house suddenly ceased to come. Upon Steen's enquiring the reason, the housekeeper informed him that her master was thinking of going abroad again. The young man's heart leaped within him at this news. Was it possible that he was so soon to see those kind Allgrove faces, and above all, that one which haunted him night and day, and to resume that life of sunshine which had seemed to him, since he quitted it, too blissful to be experienced more?

'Yes,' said Mrs. Maude, doubtless with woman's instinct divining some of his thoughts; 'he seems to meditate great changes; to let his great house in the country, for one thing. That seems strange, don't it, Sir, when he has never been down to see it since it was his?'

'Let Morden Hall!' exclaimed Charles, his hopes fading within him as quickly as they had blossomed, and his bounding heart ceasing almost to beat. 'That will be sad for poor Mrs. Blissett, to have strangers there. I am very sorry.'

'Still if he is going to foreign parts,' argued Mrs.

Maude (with the vigour born of self-interest ; for she was to retain her place in Grafton Street, it seemed), 'it is not likely he should keep two empty houses, to cost money, instead of bringing it in to him.'

'That's true,' returned Charles ruefully, the victim of involuntary conviction : 'no, that can't be expected.'

The uncertainty so weighed upon his mind, that he ventured to put the question point-blank to his patron that very day.

'Yes,' said Mr. Blissett quietly ; 'it is quite true. I meant to tell you about it myself ; but my head is in such a sad state ; I grow so forgetful.' (This was true : he had been *distract* to an extraordinary degree for days.) 'I shall go abroad for some months, perhaps even for years. In the meantime, I shall perform my promise in sending you to college.'

'You are most kind, Sir, I am sure,' returned Charles gratefully, his cheeks aglow with pleasure.

'Yes ; I shall only require one more service of you—a very small one—to-morrow.'

'You may consider it performed, Sir, I am sure. I wish that you would give me some genuine opportunity—something that should prove how deeply I estimate your generosity.'

'Don't speak of it,' returned Mr. Blissett. 'If I have done you some solid benefits, you, on the other hand, have had to bear with my humours.—Before the matter escapes me, by-the-bye, I have left in yonder desk a pocket-book which contains a sum of money for your use. There is the balance, too, which I owe you on that account about the garden at Allgrove ; you had better not take it—since the whole is a large

sum—until to-morrow. I shall probably start for Paris to-morrow night.'

'So soon, Sir? It seems scarcely right, in your present state of health, to travel alone. If my service would be welcome as a companion, I am sure it would be dutifully paid.'

'Thank you,' said Mr. Blissett coldly. 'I shall not be alone. And besides,' he added, as if by an after-thought, 'there is Morris; he understands my ways.'

'You are going to let the Hall, I understand, Sir?'

'Certainly—if you have no objection,' was the irritable reply, accompanied by a sharp searching look.

'To keep a town-house for one's housekeeper, and a country-house for—for a young gentleman, however estimable, who will only be at home during his university vacations, would be hardly an economical arrangement.'

'Indeed, Sir, such a preposterous idea never entered my thoughts.'

'I hope not. But, by-the-bye, it is the long vacation now; you will not be able to matriculate till October. You can remain here until that period, if I do not return home in the meantime.'

'You are most kind, Sir; else Mr. Mellish, who has been so good as to act as my tutor, would, I am sure, receive me at the rectory.'

'He shall do nothing of the sort,' answered Mr. Blissett furiously. 'You shall not go near Allgrove. Why are you always harping upon that string? You know it is distasteful to me: you know I detest——' He stopped himself with effort. 'I say, your identifying yourself in this manner with my connections,

and thereby putting yourself in antagonism with me, is a most ungrateful and abominable thing.'

'Really, Sir!'

'Yes; you may pretend astonishment; but you are not such a fool as to misunderstand me. From this moment, your connection with my sister-in-law and her daughter is to cease wholly. I insist upon it. You shall not go down there, and you shall not write to them. I make that a stipulation of your being sent to college. And, moreover'—for there was a kindling fire in the young man's eyes—if you disobey me, it will be worse for them also. It is my present purpose to make a handsome provision for my niece, Christie; do not divert me from it by any selfish act, young man. I am not one to be crossed; you ought to know that by this time.'

'I will not cross you, Sir,' returned Charles respectfully; the idea of doing the least harm to Christie quenching all his fire.

'I am glad to hear it, Steen,' answered his patron in mollified tones. 'And see you keep to that determination: it will be better for all concerned. I am engaged all to-day; but to-morrow, at eleven o'clock, I shall expect you—and in an obedient frame of mind.'

This conversation, containing such abundant materials for thought, sank deep into the young man's mind. It was clear that, for some time at least, he was to be *débarred* from all communication with her he loved—with those who, he felt more and more, were his only true friends. It was terrible to think of; for the letters that they wrote him were all that the young man

had in the place of the companionship so necessary and fitting to his time of life. It was like taking the sun out of the sky; not even the reflection of light would be henceforth left to him. As to the service that was expected of him on the morrow, and for which he was 'to be in an obedient frame of mind,' that did not trouble him at all, so overwhelmed was he with this unexpected calamity. He resolved to ask leave of Mr. Blissett to write at least one letter to Allgrove, to explain the silence that was for the future to be imposed upon him. And yet how *was* he to explain it?

Still revolving this grave difficulty, he presented himself in Grafton Street at the hour agreed upon. He possessed a latch-key of his own, and let himself in as usual. The house seemed to echo to his tread with even unwonted hollowness and desolation. The valet was not visible; nor was the housekeeper within doors. He entered the breakfast-room, but there were no signs of occupancy there. He then repaired to the studio, although that was not so likely a place to find his patron as it was of old, in Clifford Street. Mr. Blissett was now a great deal from home, and when within, did not paint much. He, or some one else, however, had visited the room since the preceding day, and had left a Prayer-book upon the mantelpiece—a very strange thing indeed for Mr. Blissett to leave, and a strange one even for the unaccountable valet, who, besides, had no business in that apartment. The far-off church clock faintly struck eleven. It was his patron's boast to possess but one virtue (in respect to everything save the payment of money owed)—namely, punctu-

ality ; yet the painter was behind time. At that moment, however, was heard some bustle in the hall. It was evident that some one had just entered the house, nay, more than one, for there were voices—the one gay and assuring, the other low and hesitating.

‘It is so, upon my honour,’ said the former, in reply to some doubt expressed. ‘We shall find him in the studio, pretty one, I will lay my life.’

They were his patron’s tones ; and although Charles did not recognise those of the other speaker, his heart misgave him as to whom they belonged. There were hurried steps along the passage ; then the door opened, and Mr. Frederick Blissett entered, leading Eloise by the hand. She had a bonnet and shawl on, both somewhat heavy for the time of year ; and he wore a summer-overcoat, which was not usual with him. Was it possible, was the painful thought that flashed instantaneously upon the young man’s mind at once, that they were thus equipped for travel *together* ?

‘There, did I not say his Reverence would be here?’ exclaimed the painter triumphantly.—‘Eloise did not give you credit, Steen, for being so obliging ; but I said you would be sure not to disappoint us.’

It was habitual with Mr. Blissett to address Charles in the young girl’s presence as ‘your Reverence,’ though always in a bantering tone. Whether she really believed him to be a clergyman or not, Steen could not tell ; upon the whole, he was inclined to think she did, and he had seen, as yet, no sufficient reason for undeceiving her. At this moment, however, he felt a keen regret that he had not done so ; that he had

suffered himself throughout the affair to be a mere puppet in his patron's hands. These reflections coursed through his brain in far less time than it takes to express them.

'I am here, Sir,' said he gravely, 'according to my promise; what is it you require of me?'

'I wish you to marry us—that is all—to make us man and wife. Eloise wishes it also.—Do you not, Eloise?'

The Heavenly Child, pink as a carnation, hung her head, but was understood to imply that she did wish it. It was evident that she was serious enough, let who would be joking.

'Marry you, Miss Eloise? I marry you to Mr. Blissett? That does not lie in my power.'

'Hush, dolt, idiot!' whispered the painter fiercely. 'What does it signify? If you are not a parson, you will be one—that is, if you choose. It is only a scruple which, in reality, she wishes to overcome as eagerly as I do. Do you not know a woman's nature?'

'What is the matter?' asked Eloise, speaking with difficulty, and for the first time. 'Is it not legal? Frederick—Mr. Blissett told me so.'

'It is as good as any wedding in church, dear,' said the painter eagerly; then turning his thin face, livid with passion, upon Charles, he added, hissing the words out between his teeth: 'I told you not to cross me. Take care. There is the Prayer-book; read the Marriage-service, or some of it.'

'Is there anything out of order, Mr. Steen?' asked Eloise with simplicity. 'I am almost a foreigner, you

know, and so ignorant. Can you not marry us, as he wishes ?’

‘I had forgotten the ring,’ interrupted the painter precipitately. ‘But here it is—see, that will remove all his Reverence’s scruples.—Read, man, if you love your life,’ muttered he with a furious menace. ‘To gain my ends, I stop at nothing.’

‘I have long feared so,’ answered the young man, with a glance and tone so significant, that for a moment his patron quailed before it ; ‘and now I know it.’

‘No, not yet, by Heaven !’ was the painter’s reply. ‘But, disobey me, and you shall.’

‘What *is* the matter ?’ demanded Eloise, in her broken English. She heard but little, and understood less, of what they were saying ; but she saw that something was much amiss : that it was no mere matter of form that was in question, as Mr. Blissett would have had her believe.

‘It is simply that I am not a priest, Miss Eloise,’ said Steen with great distinctness ; ‘though, indeed, if I were, I should have no power to perform your marriage in this place.’

‘Not a priest ?’ echoed Eloise, with unfeigned astonishment. ‘Impossible !’

‘He is joking,’ said Mr. Blissett with a hoarse laugh ; ‘that’s all.—Or, if you are not joking,’ added he, in the young man’s ear, ‘it will be the most luckless earnest of your life. Once more, Sir, will you read ?’

‘No ; I will not.’

Such a terrible oath burst from Mr. Blissett’s lips, that the young girl, whose hand he had held through-

out this scene, burst from him in alarm, and fled behind Steen. The painter's face expressed half-a-dozen evil passions in every glance ; his eyes balefully askew, were aglow with rage.

'Protect me, Mr. Steen,' cried the young girl sobbing, 'if you are not a priest, you are a gentleman. That man has cruelly deceived me, and would have ruined me. Take me home ; see me safe to my father's door—my poor father, who always warned me against yonder wretch.'

It is not probable that, with all his arts, Mr. Frederick Blissett had ever inspired Eloise Bird with affection for himself, however she might have been tempted to become (as she thought) his wife by the advantageous social prospects which he doubtless held out before her ; but it now seemed that she had really no feeling left regarding him save hatred and fear. Her lovely face, deprived of all tinge of colour, her graceful figure, crouching close to Steen, as though she feared a blow, afforded such a contrast to the form that had, day after day, appeared in that same room in the conscious pride of beauty, that even at that moment of indignation and distress, Charles did not fail to mark it. Frederick Blissett, too, perceived that all hope of the success of his plan was dead—that the dainty bird, notwithstanding its simplicity, had escaped from the snare of the fowler ; and he cursed the meddling hand that had set it free.

He contrived, however, to force a laugh. 'Lead the little fool home,' grinned he, 'since she cries for her father. And you—you very grateful and obedient young gentleman—you shall not say I sent you forth

the beggar I found you. You may return, and still take that which I promised you yesterday ; then never darken my doors again.'

'I shall return, Mr. Blissett, for the balance that is due to me, and for nothing else,' rejoined Steen firmly. 'And you may be sure, I shall trouble you no more. I will repay you as soon as possible every farthing that you have expended on me, though I have to live on a crust. I little thought your bounty was invested in me in hopes to gain its interest in help of this sort : it was a base and cowardly plan, Sir, to plot against one like this.' He pointed to the shrinking girl, who hung upon his arm ; but she cried out, alarmed at the other's terrible looks : 'O, do not anger him, Mr. Steen ; only take me home.'

'Yes ; take her home,' said the painter in malignant tones, as he drew aside to let them pass. 'But do not think I will not be even with *you*, my young friend ; yes, and more than even.'

Without trusting himself to make reply, but looking his patron steadily in the face, Charles Steen passed on with his fair burden drooping on his arm. The lily of the valley, broken in her father's fingers, might indeed have typified her now ; in her shame and terror, it seemed as though neither sunshine nor shower were ever to revive that lovely flower again.



CHAPTER XXVI.

MR. MORRIS PRODUCES AN UNEXPECTED WEAPON.

AT the front-door stood a closed carriage with some luggage upon it ; and as Charles and his companion appeared, the coachman got down as though to let them in ; but they passed by him rapidly, and Steen hailed a passing cab, into which they got.

‘Were those your boxes on yonder roof, Miss Eloise?’

‘Yes, yes ; but never mind *them*, Mr. Steen. Home, home !’

It was piteous to see her wring her little hands for sorrow, then place them before her blushing face for shame.

‘Why don’t you scold me, Mr. Steen?’ cried she presently. ‘Pray, scold me, else I shall feel you think even worse of me than you do. I have deserved it all, and more—much more—for deceiving my dear papa ; and yet it was for his sake—it was indeed. I thought his son-in-law would give him money—for he *said* he

would—that he might live as he used to do in France when we were rich. I never loved the artist-gentleman—and *that* was wicked of me too, to marry him since I did not love him. Oh, do scold me, Mr. Steen.'

Perhaps, in her confusion and distress, she had forgotten the young man before her was no priest, and hence her solicitude for his good opinion.

'I cannot scold you, Miss Eloise; I can only pity you,' returned he with feeling.

'And you have lost your place—your home, on my account,' added she with sudden recollection of the words she had just heard spoken, but without catching at the time the sense which they conveyed. 'O Sir what can I do? What reparation can I make? Alas, none, none. Can you ever forgive me?'

'Yes, Miss Eloise; I will forgive you upon one condition—that in future you will trust to no man who has not won the confidence of your father.'

As he said these words, the little journey was accomplished. In that tender moment of separation, was it a wicked infidelity towards his darling Christie, that the youth should bestow on his companion one parting kiss? Perhaps, in the confusion, he too had forgotten that he was not a priest, and intended to give her an ecclesiastical benediction upon the forehead; but the cab pulling up somewhat hastily, as it is the custom of cabs to do, his lips (let us go on charitably to suppose) missed that Platonic spot, and lighted on her cheek instead.

'Heaven bless you, Sir!' said she with earnest feeling, not, of course, by way of thanks for the salute,

but with reference to the peril from which Mr. Steen had so lately preserved her.

And so *that* pair of young persons parted, most probably for ever; the more prudent of our readers, perhaps, will add: 'And a good thing too, especially for Miss Christie;' but with such ill-natured distrust of our hero we have no sort of sympathy. With a single sigh for her troubles, he dismissed the Heavenly Child from his thoughts, and bidding the man drive back to Grafton Street, gave himself up to more serious reflections. He would not have entered his patron's door again, but for the circumstance that he had only a few shillings in his possession. He had received no remittances from Mr. Blissett for some time before he was summoned from Allgrove, and had settled certain accounts there out of his own private resources. It was therefore his intention to take simply what was due to him of the money that the painter had set apart for his use, and then apply himself to some sort of work at once, whereby a beginning might be made of the reduction of that load of obligation, which, once so lightly borne, now seemed like a rope about his neck, ready to choke him. All respect for his patron was gone for ever, but not all regard. He did not forget that, certainly with no such unworthy purpose in view as he had lately endeavoured to effect, Mr. Blissett had succoured him in sore trouble, and been the indirect means of his possessing friends, and what, compared with his former state, might be called fortune. If his benefactor should even now hold out his hand—the hand that had raised him from the depths of poverty—in proffer of reconciliation, Charles would not perhaps

have hesitated to take it, although he felt that their relation of patron and client had ceased for ever. The hired carriage was still at the door when he reached Grafton Street, whereby Steen rightly judged that Mr. Blissett had not left the house. He let himself in with his latch-key, and entered the dining-room at once. If his patron was there, so much the worse; some unpleasant sentences must probably be exchanged between them; if not, he would take his due, and be off, thereby avoiding the distress of a final interview. He opened the door with some trepidation: no one was, however, in the room; he listened, and thought he could hear the painter's step in the far-off studio; then he trod on tip-toe, in his desire that he himself should not be heard. The desk stood before him, which he had Mr. Blissett's own instructions to open, and take from it far more than he intended to touch. Still, this act, about which he would have thought nothing an hour ago, was repulsive to him now that he was no longer in his patron's confidence. There was a large mirror, in a black oak frame, above the mantelpiece, and as he passed by, it seemed to him almost to reflect the features of a thief; yet he had only come to claim his own, and less than had been bestowed upon him. His fingers trembled as he turned the key, which, with the painter's usual carelessness, was generally left in the lock, with a bunch of other keys depending from it. He lifted the lid, and took out the pocket-book that lay just within it, and which he knew contained the notes. He unrolled quite a little bundle of them, and without counting them, was about to select ten pounds (rather less than the sum owing to

him), and to put back the others, when a sudden hand was laid upon his shoulder, and turning swiftly round, with a crimson face, he beheld the immovable features of Mr. Morris. 'Ah!' ejaculated that worthy with a dry chuckle; 'so that is your little game, Mr. Charles Steen, is it?'

'What do you mean, you insolent fellow?' returned Charles indignantly. 'How dare you come spying here?'

'Yes, spying,' answered the other with a sneer; 'otherwise, how are we to catch our thieves. I have been watching you from behind yonder curtain as you trod upon your toes, and stopped with every step to listen. I have seen many a thief walk, and—— Ah! would you?'

If Mr. Morris had not been possessed of far greater agility than his usually slow movements and solemn demeanour argued, the blow which the young fellow here aimed exactly between his eyes, would have disposed of him for the next few minutes; but he avoided it by stepping nimbly to one side, and clapping his hand to his pocket, pulled out a constable's staff. 'I am an officer,' said he, 'and if you resist, it will be at your own peril.'

'There will be a vacancy in your corps very shortly, if you touch me,' cried the young man snatching up the poker.

Either all officers of justice are not of such an indomitable spirit as they represent themselves and one another upon oath in the police reports every day, or Mr. Morris was an exception to his heroic brethren.

He flourished his staff, but stepped backward at the same time, and shouted: 'Mr. Blissett, Mr. Blissett!'

The next minute the painter was in the room, looking from one to the other in apparent amazement.

'What *is* the meaning of this, Morris? And you, Mr. Steen, what on earth are you about with that poker?'

'Just now, he's at manslaughter, Sir, but two minutes ago he had got your pocket-book, and was stealing notes.'

'I have many reasons to be dissatisfied with Mr. Steen,' observed the painter coldly, 'but I cannot believe *that*.'

Then it flashed upon the young man's mind upon the instant that he had fallen into a snare which had been purposely laid to catch him. The permission given to him, in private, to open the desk and take the notes, was now—he read it in his patron's malicious face, with those cruel eyes askew—to be denied.

Nevertheless, he struggled against a conviction which would impute such infamy to his whilom benefactor.

'You know, Sir,' said he, 'that I had your own directions to take these notes?'

A struggle, admirably feigned by his mobile features, seemed to be going on within the painter's mind.

'I would do almost anything,' at last he said, 'to screen you from such disgrace as this, young man, but I cannot tell a lie.'

'Well, for a young un,' observed Mr. Morris, with quite an air of admiration, 'he is a most owdacious one! The idea of your having given him leave, Sir!'

'It's quite preposterous, of course,' continued Mr. Blissett, addressing himself to the police detective, although unwilling to meet the horror and contempt that were exhibited in the face of the accused. 'It overwhelms me. I did not anticipate, although I had grave reasons for suspicion, when I set you to watch this unhappy youth, that anything quite so serious as this would come of it.'

'Serious, indeed, Sir! It's the neatest case, for, indeed, he was a cunning one! This is the first time I have ever been able to catch him, but fortunately it's a most complete affair.'

'Is it possible,' said Charles, addressing himself to the painter in slow grave tones, 'that you are going to carry your baseness to its bitter end? Is it your intention to endeavour to blast my character in public, as well as before this fellow? I do not fear you, Sir, one whit: I have friends who know you, and who know *me*, and who will not be slow to speak, should the necessity arise. I simply wish to know to what lengths you are prepared to push this devilish scheme?'

'That's always their way, Sir,' observed Mr. Morris, who had now assumed a certain professional air, which, although grave, was quite distinct from his former dull solemnity. 'A prosecution for felony is either—to gentlemen of this sort—a devilish scheme, or they throw themselves on their knees and aver that

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any punishment would be too small for their breach of confidence to so kind a benefactor. You must take care not to be gammoned, Sir.'

'If I could think,' said Mr. Blissett reflectively, 'that this shocking scene would be a warning lesson for life to this unhappy young man——'

'It *will* be a lesson for life, Sir,' said Charles sternly, 'and a warning indeed.'

'I *thought* he'd gammon him,' murmured Mr. Morris to himself, with an involuntary movement of hands and head expressive of contemptuous pity; 'and blessed if he aint done it already!'

'I say,' continued the painter, addressing his late confidential assistant, but with averted face, 'if I could be sure that you would henceforth become an honest man, and *forget all the past*' (his tones here assumed an intense significance), '*not seeking to intrude yourself among those of my connections to whom I have unfortunately been the means of introducing you, or (what would be better still), if you would promise to quit England altogether*, I would not only forbear to use the power to punish which I undoubtedly possess, but would even assist you——'

'It is unnecessary to add insult, Sir, to an injury which is inexpiable,' interrupted Charles.

'*The most owdacious!*' muttered Mr. Morris. 'I really never *did*!'

'You are intractable, young man, and deserve no mercy,' pursued Mr. Blissett impatiently. 'Can you not perceive the loophole for escape which, with misplaced clemency, I am still offering to you?'

'I perceive it, Sir, well,' answered Steen. 'If you

will request that person to withdraw, I will describe it very accurately, or do you prefer that I should do so in his presence?’

‘If you take my advice, Sir, you will not remain alone with this young gentleman,’ interposed the officer, ‘for it is my belief he’d stick at nothin’.

‘I shall certainly not afford him a private interview,’ said Mr. Blissett. ‘The time has gone by for even the show of confidence between him and me. Since you understand the terms upon which you are suffered to depart—Silence as to the past; and the discontinuance of all connection with my relatives for the future,—you may go unharmed. You may even take so much of that sum of which you would have possessed yourself in so nefarious a manner, as will defray your expenses for a moderate time, while you are on the look-out for a situation elsewhere—only, as you may well imagine, I can scarcely advise you to come to *me* for a good character.’

‘I will take the ten pounds, that is the balance of the gardening account, due to myself, and which was all that I intended to take when this man interrupted me.’

‘He had the whole biling—every note there was—in his *hand*,’ interpolated the officer: ‘that’s all *I* can say. His intention to restore the rest on ’em must have been confined to his buzzum.’

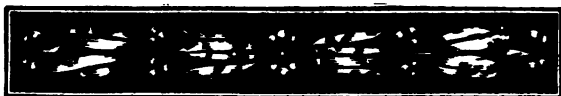
‘I am afraid so, indeed,’ said Mr. Blissett, shaking his head, and in quite pathetic accents. ‘You will bear me witness, Mr. Morris, that I have not been hard upon this young man.’

‘Upon my word, Sir, and asking your pardon, you

seem to me to have been quite the contrary,' answered the other ; 'indeed, most uncommon soft.'

Charles uttered not one syllable, but quietly folding up two five-pound notes, and placing them in his pocket, walked slowly out of the room with his eyes fixed to the last upon his patron's face, which never once turned towards his own.





CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MAGIC DISC.

THE just indignation and high spirit which had supported Charles Steen throughout his late adventure, gave place, before he had even reached the house in Clifford Street, and sat himself down in its desolate parlour, to depression and stupor. The calamity that had overtaken him was indeed nothing less than overwhelming. That he had lost his 'situation,' as Mr. Blissett had termed it, was a very small portion of the misfortune indeed. He was about also to lose his friends, for if he ventured to retain them, he was well convinced it would be greatly to their own hurt. It was evident that, at all hazards, including false witness and conspiracy—for, for all he knew, this Morris was playing into his patron's hands—Mr. Blissett was determined to sever him from all at—what in his heart he had begun to consider—home. For what reason, he had not just then the patience to ask himself. His visiting Allgrove would be the signal, he felt convinced for the painter's cutting off that 'provision' which he had made (or was about to

make) for Christie. Nay, would his enmity even stop there? Such a man as the painter had proved himself to be, was capable of working harm to anybody, even to the poor widow and her child. There was no crime, after that day's experience, for which Charles would not have given him credit. If he was mad—as he almost hoped he was—there was indeed a devilish method in his madness.

Steen did not fear the law, even if Mr. Blissett should venture to attempt to make him appear a criminal; he did not fear for himself at all, but for others. But even on his own account, he felt extremely wretched; more so than even when he was in the House of Refuge, dominated over by the brutal Curtis, and without means or calling. His anger against the man who had lifted him from that position, obliterated for the time, in a heart most susceptible of gratitude, all remembrance of benefit. He had been used as a cat's-paw for at least one vile purpose, and upon his refusal to have share in the baseness, he had been thus infamously calumniated. And for how long had this plot been preparing? At all events, ever since the engagement of this man Morris. Even if he had consented to assist in the betrayal of poor Eloise, it is probable he would have found himself in the same position as at present. When Mr. Blissett had told him where the notes were placed, and bid him not take them out until the last moment, it was plain that the snare was laid. His patron, then, even before his return from abroad (for Morris had apparently come to England with him), had resolved to get rid of him, and in this infamous fashion. They

were to part, but Mr. Blissett was still to keep him under his thumb. The painter's strange conduct when he last left Clifford Street, the eager desire that he should be off, and his coming secretly to the railway station to make sure that he had gone, the looks of hatred and suspicion with which, too, he had been regarded—all these occurred to Steen's mind, as soon as it had sufficiently recovered to begin to reflect. Was it that the patron felt that his protégé knew too much of him, and must be effectively silenced? But if so, why did he set him such a task as the perusal of his private letters, so many of which exhibited their recipient in so evil a light? Was it to lull any suspicion that the young man might have entertained of the painter's enmity, by an affectation of confidence, whereby, too, the scheme of the bank-notes might be more effectually perpetrated? or was that sifting of his private correspondence a mere flaw in the plot, to be accounted for only upon that one supposition which had so often obtruded itself upon Steen's mind—namely, that Mr. Frederick Blissett was mad? Considering the fact that his brother's letters—which it was clear he was annoyed to find the young man had read—had been suffered to remain among the rest, Charles was inclined to the latter explanation of the occurrence.

The unhappy young fellow, after brooding over his sad case in all its bearings for hours, occupied himself in making up as accurate an account as he could frame of the pecuniary obligations under which he lay with respect to his patron, without any reference to the services he had rendered *per contra*. Until he

had discharged every penny of this self-imposed debt, he felt he could never feel a free man. He would live on two shillings a day, if some employment did not present itself, and pay *that* off, at all hazards. Whatever the painter had bestowed upon him, should be returned at once. The next morning, he would examine his little wardrobe for that purpose, for a gift garment would now seem a very shirt of Nessus. Before retiring to rest, he wrote one brief note to the widow, and one to Mr. Mellish : assuring them, though he was forbidden further correspondence, of his unalterable affection and gratitude, and begging them — whatever misrepresentations they might receive — to judge him according to their own knowledge of him ; indeed he did not fear the effects of any slander either at Rill Bank or the rectory. He would post those letters on the morrow with his own hand, and then having secured some cheap lodging elsewhere, present himself to that good curate who had shown himself already willing to serve him when he was at the Refuge. That was the only plan, after much thought, which at present occurred to him.

How often do we mortals weary and cudgel our brains in the formation of designs that not only do not succeed, but are destined never to be put into execution ! Hell, they say, is paved with good intentions, and we may reasonably hope, since they are treated with such scorn, that our bad intentions, which never blossom into actual sin, may similarly not be considered very noteworthy ; but where is that Limbo placed to which embryo projects, neither good nor

bad, and which perish in the bud, are consigned? For certain it must occupy a prodigious space!

After a short night of broken slumber, Charles Steen arose, and having dressed himself, put carefully aside all such articles of clothing as had been presented to him by his late patron. Among these was that indifferent suit—a very shabby one for a person of the painter's dandified nature to possess—which he had put on that first morning in Clifford Street, and the sight of which had so mysteriously excited his new patron's anger. He remembered the very words that he had used, and how he had pointed to certain stains upon the waistcoat with fastidious loathing and disgust. 'Burn it, burn it!' he had cried out, and when Steen had said that there was also silver in it, he had cried: 'Keep it yourself, or throw it on the fire also.' Steen had not burned the clothes, being under the impression that Mr. Blissett had only used the words with the meaning that he did not wish to set eyes on them again; and as for the silver, it was not current money at all, but merely an old coin which he had found in a side-pocket of the vest, and which lay there still, for in putting the garment away he had forgotten its existence. Now, however, as he held the waistcoat before him, and his fingers came against the hard substance in the pocket, the whole occurrence flashed upon him. He took out the coin, meaning to place it with the other things belonging to his patron, when a curious phenomenon took place. The whole room on a sudden began to spin round with him; his knees trembled under him; all the blood in his veins

seemed to be rushing and surging to his brain. He sat down perforce upon the bed, and then began to shake and shiver as though he were on the verge of a dangerous fever. The small but tolerably solid piece of silver which he still held in his hand, seemed to have acted upon him with all the power, and much more than the speed, which the influence of the 'disc' of the electrobiologist effects upon its susceptible victims. For a minute or two, he was not sufficiently master of himself to know what had happened, or even where he was ; but sighing deeply, and passing his right hand over his forehead, like one waking from an evil dream, he found that he still clutched the stained waistcoat in his fingers. This, with a shudder, he threw from him, with much the same gesture of disgust that his patron himself had used, then sat, while minute after minute went by, staring intently at the coin which he retained in his other hand. And yet it was no magic circle, but simply, as we have said, an apparently ancient piece of money, with the effigy upon it almost obliterated, although a very accurate observer might perhaps, as Charles did, dimly discern the outlines of a man and a horse.



CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONVICTION.

SUCH was the working of the magic disc, that, so far from posting the letters he had written overnight, Charles threw them both into the fire, and with his brain in a tumult of fear and horror—but not perhaps without some hopeful dreams as well, for the excellent young fellow was but human—set out at once for Allgrove. Yes; the spot he had made up his mind, only a few hours before, to shun for years, and perhaps for ever, he was now bent upon visiting with the utmost possible dispatch. He reached the railway-station just in time for the first train that stopped at Chudleigh. What he should do when he reached his journey's end, was to depend upon circumstances; but in the meantime, he had to frame some plausible explanation for so soon revisiting Allgrove, and also for as speedy a return to London. It was most likely that the news of his disgrace would have already reached the cottage, and perhaps the rectory also, through the post. Mr. Frederick Blissett would hardly have lost time in telling his own story in

his own way. If what he feared—but, as I have said, not without a secret gleam of hope, neither unnatural nor altogether selfish—should turn out to be groundless, Charles would but have come down to take his leave in person instead of by letter, and would at once write to his former patron to tell him so, at the same time passing his word to henceforth abstain from future communication with his connections. If, on the other hand, his apprehensions proved correct, his return to town would be still more imperative, and his late interview with Mr. Frederick Blissett would not be perhaps, after all, his last. As he thought of this—as he sat alone in the otherwise vacant carriage—he shuddered, as he had done but once before in his life—namely, upon that same morning—and felt for his former patron that which, since yesterday, he thought he could never feel—a touch of pity.

At the station he procured a fly at the little inn; the driver, newly taken on at the establishment, and a stranger to him, was full of the incidents of the neighbourhood, which he imparted to his fare with great gusto.

On the brow of that hill, where Mr. Mellish had performed to him the same office of cicerone in so different a manner, he stopped, and pointed out with his whip to the long bare valley lying westward, which Charles had seen so often, not only in reality, and in the charcoal sketch, but in perturbed dreams. 'There was one Squire Blissett, of the very place as you be going to, Sir, *murdered* there one morning. But perhaps you may have heard on the matter?'

'I have heard that he was killed there,' returned

Charles carelessly ; 'but accidentally thrown from his horse, as I understood.'

'Ah! no, Sir—not he, poor gentleman. The crowner's 'quest returned "Wilful Murder;" and you mark my words: they'll find him out some day—I mean the man as did it. They allus do, sooner or later, bless you; allus——. Come up, horse, wut.' And his whip-lash gave the flourish which was lacking to his verbal eloquence.

Steen was not so credulous as Miss Eloise Bird, but at such a time and place, the driver's words sounded ominous enough, and certainly did not lessen the oppression that weighed heavily upon his mind. Even the sight of the charming little village, with its shining woods and river, gave him no pleasure. The errand on which he had come was too weighty and terrible, now that he had reached the spot on which it had to be accomplished, for any light thought to intrude itself. Fortunately, what was already known, or what he had to tell of recent events which pertained to himself, would be sufficient to account for the gloom he felt it impossible to shake off or conceal.

Mr. Mellish was not at the usual post of espial, in his little parlour, and he passed the rectory, he was glad to think, unseen, and drove straight to Rill Bank, bidding the fly-man 'put up' at the inn, and be in readiness for his return to town. His reception at the cottage was so warm and affectionate, that he felt at once that Mr. Blissett's 'statement of facts' had arrived, and that the widow and her daughter wished to show him how little they believed and how much they despised it.

'If this trumped-up piece of infamy,' observed Mrs. Blissett, in contemptuous reference to her brother-in-law's letter, 'had proceeded, my dear Charles, from any other person, or persons, no matter how respectable—such as the bench of bishops, for instance—we should not have given credit to one syllable of it ; but coming as it does from Mr. Frederick Blissett, you may imagine how much credence it got from *me*. As for Christie, she blushes, you see, for the relative that could imagine such a baseness, and well she may. And indeed, there is only one excuse for him—the man is mad.'

'The man is mad,' repeated Charles mechanically. 'I do confess, my dear Mrs. Blissett, that idea has occurred to me of late so often that it has almost become conviction.'

'He must be mad,' cried Christie with indignation, 'to call you a thief, Mr. Steen—for that is the shameful word he writes—or, if he is not mad, he is something a great deal worse.'

The echo of those last words was taken up in the young man's heart, although he did not give it utterance: 'Or, if he is not mad, he must be something a great deal worse.'

'And does he call me anything else beside a thief?' inquired he, with a grave smile; 'that is, if I am not asking for any breach of confidence?'

'You should have read the whole precious composition, my dear lad,' returned the widow, 'if you had arrived a few hours earlier; but the fact is, as soon as she learned its contents, Miss Christie there—the little Fury—tore it up, and threw it in the fire.'

'Yes, indeed,' cried that young lady with a charming glow in cheek and eye, 'to keep such a thing was almost as abominable as to write it! I will answer for it, Mr. Mellish burned his letter also.'

Charles regarded her with a grateful look. 'Ah,' said he, musing, 'the rector had also an account of my misdemeanours, had he?'

'Yes. Mr. Frederick must have been bitter against you indeed,' answered the widow, 'for his letters were always wont to be short scraps, whereas both these were quite biographical memoirs: all that we knew before about you, in fact, only misstated in such ludicrously malignant fashion, that Mr. Mellish and I had quite a hearty laugh over them.'

'I did not laugh,' cried Christie, her ire flashing through her tears; 'I thought them wicked, cruel lies. The man that could invent them would do anything. "Uncle Fred," indeed, as he calls himself! I don't wish to hear of him, to think of him, to be reminded that he is my uncle at all!'

'There!' quoth the widow archly; 'you see, Mr. Steen, what disunion you have caused in a heretofore attached family! "A chiel amang us takin' notes," as the poet says. How could you do so?'

'How can you laugh at it, mamma?' pleaded Christie reprovingly. 'It seems to me too shocking even to think of.'

'How can I cry at it, darling? I have long lamented to see one for whom I entertain so high a respect as Charles, in the employment of your uncle, and I am glad he is about to leave it, no matter at what temporary inconvenience to himself. For you, if I know

you,' added she, addressing the young man, 'are not one to eat the bread of idleness, but will make your own way in the world with honour and profit.'

'At all events, dear Mrs. Blissett,' answered Charles with modesty, 'I will endeavour to merit your good opinion. I certainly do not fear work. The worst of the future that lies before me is that I must needs be separated from—from you and Miss Christie, and the good rector—for I know not how long——'

'Why so?' interrupted the widow with astonishment.

'I have promised it,' stammered Steen. 'I have passed my word—or seemed to him by my silence to do so, which is the same thing—to Mr. Frederick Blissett.'

'To Mr. Frederick? What has he to do with you now, Charles? What is the matter?—There's some mystery here,' cried she, while the young man remained silent.—'Christie, dear, leave us alone for a little, will you?'

The young girl, trained in habits of obedience, and notwithstanding that her white face expressed anxiety at least equal to that displayed by her mother, rose at once and left the room.

'Now, Charles, let there be no secrets between us two.'

'I am glad, dear Madam, you have sent Miss Christie away,' said Steen, after a short pause. 'The reason that I have to give for my—my separating from all who are dear to me—would annoy, and perhaps distress her, since the necessity arises upon her account.'

Mrs. Blissett, who, as usual when greatly excited, had raised herself painfully on the couch, sank back with a sigh of relief. She had evidently expected some communication of quite another sort; but now while Steen still blushed and stammered, she regarded him with an encouraging smile; and yet she was as far off from guessing the true cause of his embarrassment as ever.

‘Before giving my reason, dear Mrs. Blissett, I would like to exact one promise, and to ask one question—conditions which you may be sure are not impertinent. You must promise, then, to conceal what I have to say from Miss Christie.’

She shook her head. ‘My daughter and I have all things in common, Charles.’

‘At least, however, you will not tell her until I am gone.’

‘I will promise that, Charles. Now for the question?’

‘Did you receive any information, dear Madam, from Mr. Frederick this morning concerning your daughter?’

‘Not a word.’

‘Nevertheless, I happen to know that it is his intention to make some immediate provision for Miss Christie.’

‘Indeed,’ returned the widow carelessly. ‘What, then, is the reason of this sudden, yet tardy generosity?’

‘He is going abroad for a long sojourn, and perhaps he feels it fitting—as indeed it is—that he should leave his only blood-relation here, in circumstances more in accordance with his own.’

‘You are not speaking like yourself, Charles,’ said Mrs. Blissett quietly: ‘these stilted phrases conceal

something behind them. I am sure they do. Come, let me help you, as they do in court, by a question or two. Have you any reason to suppose that Mr. Frederick contemplates matrimony?’

‘No, Madam. He has simply seen reason—or pretends to have done so—to be greatly dissatisfied with my poor self; so much so, that his disfavour will extend, I fear, to all who show me any kindness.’

‘Ah, I see now. Even to the object of his present beneficent intentions—his niece?’

‘That is so, my dear Madam.’

‘But we shall not give you up, Charles, for so many hundreds a year, for all that,’ said the widow smiling.

‘That is only what I expected from your gracious lips,’ returned the young man fervently. ‘It deeply gratifies me to hear it; but, nevertheless, it cannot alter what is my fixed purpose. Nay, such generosity, if I should take advantage of it, would make my conduct all the baser. I must—indeed, I must, dear Madam—be henceforth a stranger to you and yours. Even if you were to reject Mr. Frederick’s provision, which, for your daughter’s sake, I trust you will not do—and I am sure Mr. Mellish will be of the same opinion—even then, I say, I could never come back to Allgrove, as in the old happy time.—You do not misunderstand me, dear Madam?’

‘I understand you well, Charles,’ said the widow, tenderly. ‘You will act as your conscience tells you to do, and it would ill become me to dissuade you—Christie and I also have our notions of what is becom-

ing.—So you have lost your patron and your friends at a single blow, it seems!’ said she compassionately, after a little pause. ‘In exacting the promise you speak of, did this autocratic gentleman, may I ask, make any provision for *you*?’

‘He did offer me a large sum of money, dear Madam.’

‘But you did not take it? That’s a brave lad!’ cried the widow admiringly. ‘Yet still, on account of the threat—implied or expressed—with regard to Christie, you mean to exile yourself from Allgrove?’

‘There is no other course open to me, dear Mrs. Blissett. I would far rather be self-exiled than received beneath your roof under such circumstances; besides, I am not cast down, you see. Time, of which plenty lies before me, may bring brighter days.’

‘True,’ said Mrs. Blissett with a heavy sigh, ‘you are yet young. In the meantime, dear boy, what are your plans? Have you any money to start with? I am afraid that piece of extravagant generosity’ (she pointed to the gay little piano) ‘has crippled you sadly.’

‘Nay, dear Madam, I have enough and to spare, I assure you.’

‘And not a penny of what was that man’s, you say?’

‘Not one. Every shilling that he ever spent upon me shall also be repaid! then I shall begin to breathe; then I shall have power to work.’

It was the first time, in Mrs. Blissett’s presence that Charles Steen had ever shown (and even now only by his tone and features) an hostility, or even a disrespect, towards her brother-in-law.

'Ah, you have found him out?' cried she, her eyes gleaming with fierce pleasure. 'Frederick Blissett is a base man, Sir—is he not?'

'Well, I confess,' said Charles with affected carelessness, 'I shall be as glad to cry quits in the matter of pecuniary obligation to Mr. Frederick as Christian in the allegory was to get rid of his burden.' (He took the ancient coin out of his pocket, and endeavoured to spin it upon a little table that stood between him and the widow's sofa.) 'I intend to apply to the clergyman in town who was my friend of old,' continued the young fellow, 'and see what he can do for me; I cannot ask the good rector, because Mr. Frederick's interdict extends to all at Allgrove; otherwise——'

'Great Heaven!' ejaculated the widow suddenly, her white face turning to a dreadful leaden hue; 'where did you get that coin?'

'Well, curiously enough,' answered Charles with as much unconcern as he could assume, and not daring to lift his eyes towards his interrogatress, 'that is just the one possession still remaining to me for which I have to thank Mr. Frederick.'

'Frederick—Frederick Blissett gave you that coin?' gasped she. 'When? Where? How did he get it?—Give it here.'

Charles looked up now. The invalid was sitting bolt upright, clutching with one hand the back of the sofa for support, the other was eagerly stretched out to receive the coin. The hunger in her face was wolfish—terrible to see.

'Give it here—give it to me, I say.'

He placed the coin in her trembling fingers, and they carried it eagerly to her eyes.

'It is the same,' gasped she; 'I should know it among ten thousand. I saw it last in his dear hand. Tell me, Sir—if you know—how came that man—your master—in possession of it? Do you hear me? Speak.'

It is a question which even Bishop Butler did not leave behind him entirely settled, whether we poor mortals, who tell so many fibs every hour, are ever justified, by the strict rules of virtue, under any possible circumstances, in telling a lie at all. It must be conceded to Mr. Charles Steen, that whether justified or not, he firmly believed himself to be so, and, moreover, that the lie he did tell was a magnificent specimen—one which of its class recent hours of thought had brought to perfection in readiness for this very occasion.

'Mr. Frederick Blissett received it, Madam, from some official quarter immediately after the coroner's inquest. He expressed a wish to have some memento of your poor husband's death, and the coin was sent to him, in answer to his application, as a matter of course, when the other articles were returned to you at the Hall.'

It was impossible to resist the force of such an explanation, delivered too with the business-like air of an unprejudiced registrar of births and deaths, who is supplying information you have purchased for a shilling.

'Thank Heaven! thank Heaven!' ejaculated the widow, feebly wiping her forehead, upon which the

dew of unutterable horror had gathered. 'God forgive me for what I had in my mind before you spoke, Charles!'

The sense of relief experienced by the young man was hardly less than his companion's, although he took care not to show it. One part of the terrible task before him was at least accomplished: he had verified his worst suspicions without arousing those of the widow; nay, he had even laid the latter to rest, and with how great comfort to herself! For this woman, so resolute against her brother-in-law, while his guilt was but a figment of her own morbid brain, had been shocked to the uttermost when she saw, as she fancied, the evidence of his crime placed before her eyes. Even now, so prostrated was she by her late exertion, that she offered scarce any opposition to Steen's departure.

A presentiment that he should find Christie in the little dining-room beneath, did not prove groundless.

'I heard you saying "good-bye" to mamma,' said she, in faltering tones, 'and so I crept in here. O, Charles, it sounded like a farewell.'

'I trust not—I think not, Christie,' said he encouragingly.

'And I must be content with this, and not ask you what it all means?'

'You must not, dear Christie. Your mother will tell you all. There is a dark cloud over us just now; but it will pass, and there will be sunshine again—the old soft sunshine. I must be in London to-night.—Good-bye.'

And in a few minutes he was again upon his way.

Time, indeed—one hour more or less—might be just now of the greatest possible importance ; for suppose Frederick Blissett should yet go abroad, notwithstanding that he was disappointed of his fair companion? Supposing he should start, without (as was probable enough) giving any clue to his destination, before that question could be put to *him* to which the widow had just received so specious a reply from Steen—‘How came he by that coin?’ Nay—and this was an inquiry far more difficult and awful for him to answer—*How came he in possession of it before, according to his own showing, he had received the news of his brother’s decease?* For Charles well remembered that the passionate words : ‘Burn that waistcoat, and the money too,’ were spoken in the studio, before they entered the breakfast-room, where lay the letter announcing Squire Blissett’s death. No wonder, then, there had been such magic in this coin, the appearance of which, so coinciding with that described by Jem Templar, had at once conjured up in Steen’s terror-stricken brain the image of a fratricide! The only loophole of escape from this suspicion had lain in an accidental similarity in the coins ; he had gone down to Allgrove for the sole purpose of having this point decided. There were only two persons living who were capable of doing so ; Jem Templar, who had found it, and Mrs. Blissett. Of the former’s powers of discrimination in the matter, Charles had no high opinion, and, besides, the honest fellow was almost certain to gossip about the thing, and especially to the little doctor, who so often visited the Druid stones, and who was just the last man in the world to

whom Steen would have had it revealed. Mrs. Blissett's testimony was convincing, and her future silence upon the matter might be depended upon. She never spoke of the circumstances connected with her husband's death to anyone, except perhaps to Christie, and he felt sure she would not speak of what had so shaken her that day, even to her. He had got back the coin into his own possession, so that the sight of it should not provoke discussion or inquiry. He felt convinced that he and one other man might for the future be the sole human repositories of the terrible secret. That he himself was in possession of it, there was scarce any room for doubt. A score of corroborative circumstances now flashed upon him, which even long ago had aroused, as we have seen, his vague suspicions. But now, each was a revelation in itself. He could now make only too probable a guess at the cause of that strange behaviour of his patron's upon the night of their first acquaintance. The painter's nervous terrors; his disinclination to be left alone; his reiteration of the fact that his illness had confined him to his bed for so many hours—hours in which he had not been in Clifford Street at all, but had been journeying in the train, or over the downs upon a terrible errand, which had at last been accomplished in Burslem Bottom. He remembered the anxiety with which his patron had inquired of Mrs. Maude as to whether anyone had called to see him upon the preceding evening; apprehensive, without doubt, that importunity might have gained admittance, and the vacant bed, the empty room, been discovered. The very circumstances under which the painter had

engaged him were almost unaccountable, except upon the ground that all this was true.

Mr. Blissett had visited the Refuge in search—not of a model, for he had hardly made use of him as such at all—but of some one whom he could make his companion, as well as his creature—to relieve the intolerable terrors that agitated his morbid and conscience-stricken soul. Some one, too, that he might send down, whither he dare not himself venture, to Allgrove, who might supply him with the local news—scandals, suspicions—dangers it might be—such as that verdict which had so aroused his wrath—that it was so imperative for him to guard against. He had engaged him as his ‘librarian,’ forgetting that none but himself should be aware that he possessed a library; and he had offered him a salary, which the painter, burdened with debt, and almost without a shilling, could have had no prospect of paying, only that he knew that he was even then the master of Morden Hall. That Mr. Frederick should have been jealous of his brother, was natural enough, but that he should have resented with such fury any defence or praise of him (as in the case of that bundle of letters), and that he should have regarded the widow and her daughter with such hostility, could only arise (as it now seemed to Steen) from the consciousness of having committed some cruel fraternal wrong. Again, could his sudden enmity to Charles—that otherwise inexplicable change from confidence to hate—have been aroused by anything save the consciousness that he had rendered himself to the young man an object of suspicion? How could that enmity have become

so relentless as to cause him to seek his ruin by such infamous means, were it not inspired by terror, and the need for keeping one who might prove dangerous under his thumb for ever ?

Lastly, what could have moved his wretched patron to reproduce with his pencil, only to erase them as soon as completed, the exact spot where the squire had met his end, and those likenesses of the dead man himself, of which Mrs. Maude had spoken, except that morbid longing which murderers are said to feel to revisit the scenes of their crimes, to gaze upon the faces of their victims, but which in the painter's case had found so characteristic a channel ?

If any one of these reflections had been sufficient to awake his wonder of old, how far more powerfully did it strike him now ; while the cumulative force of all was absolutely overwhelming.

How the position of affairs had changed since that time when the widow, moved by mere instinct, or, as it seemed, by groundless prejudice, had bidden him, with such mysterious solemnity, be the avenger of innocent blood ! She had given up her own suspicions as unfounded at the very moment when they were capable of being resolved into awful certainty ; while he himself was about to become a voluntary avenger ! What ! An avenger upon his patron, the man who, with whatever motive, had raised him from obscurest poverty, and the near and only relative of Christie Blissett ? No. There lay a more difficult task before Charles Steen than that of mere avenging.



CHAPTER XXIX.

AT BAY.

T was late when Charles Steen arrived in town, and he had a matter to transact even then before he could reach Grafton Street, so that when he did so, night had fallen. However, his business did not admit of delay, nor of standing on ceremony. Mrs. Maude opened the door to him, and a very wonder-stricken air she wore at seeing whom she had admitted. 'What, *you* come back again, Mr. Steen, I was afraid——'

'Is he gone?' interrupted Charles with feverish eagerness.

'O yes, Sir; he went yesterday; and a precious good riddance, too, say I; for of all the silent, disagreeable, prying creatures——'

'Tush! I don't mean Morris; I mean Mr. Blissett.'

'O, master is at home. Something has occurred to delay his going abroad.—But'—here she hesitated—'I think you would be wise to tell him what you have to say by letter. You and I were always friends, Mr. Steen, and as for what that Paul Pry of a Morris

may say, I don't believe a tittle of it ; but master is very much put out with you, Sir, and it's no use denying it.'

'I must see him, however,' observed Charles quietly, 'let my visit be ever so unwelcome. Is he in the studio?'

'O no, Sir. He is confined to his room.—O, Mr. Steen'—here she looked nervously round, and began to whisper—'he's ill the same way as he was before, when I telegraphed to you from Clifford Street, only much worse than he was then. It's the head, Sir, that's where it is. I am not afraid upon my own account, but I think it's very like he'll do himself a mischief some day. He's worn to a shadder, and life is quite a burden to him—anybody can see that. And yet with his thousands a year, and him quite a young man still, and so clever, how sad it seems! If he could only get a nice wife, now, who wouldn't mind his whims nor his tantrums. It's such a pity, for he seems to be naturally fond of children, since he's always talking to himself about some Heavenly Child or another.'

'Is he in bed?' inquired Charles impatiently.

'Lor, no, Sir. Why he hasn't been to bed, he tells me, for months, and certainly not since he returned to England. He drops asleep, now and then, in the studio, or the dining-room ; but it's my belief he has had no rest o' nights—to call rest—for weeks and weeks.'

'Indeed ! his health then must be worse than usual. I remember he always suffered from indigestion.'

'No, no, Sir : it aint that. We've all of us indiges-

tion, bless ye ; you'll have it yourself, all in good time. It's my belief, Mr. Steen,'—here the housekeeper put her mouth close to the young man's ear—'as my poor master is haunted.'

'Haunted ?'

'Hush ! Yes, that's what it is. When he's alone—although it sounds Irish-like to say so—there's always somebody in the room with him. I have heard him, when I've passed the door, talking quite out loud again and again.'

'And what do they talk about ?'

'O, *the other* don't say anything. But just as though he did, Mr. Frederick will stop a bit, and then reply.—I'm used to it now, but at first it made my blood creep.'

'Does it seem as though your master were angry, or how ?'

'Well, he begins—for I own to you, Mr. Steen, I've heard from end to end of it, through the keyhole : Job couldn't have resisted it, nor Joseph neither—he will begin quite pleasant and soft-spoken, then he will ask for something—I can't rightly make out what—and the other, I suppose, refuses to give it to him. At all events, master gets quite wild (just as though he was contradicted by flesh and blood), and presently cries out : "Take that," and makes believe to knock the other down. If it wasn't so dreadful, Mr. Steen, and to compare small things with great, it's for all the world like *Punch* without the dog.'

'Is there anything in his hand when he seems to give the blow ?' inquired Steen, with curiosity.

'Well, Sir, it's odd you should have asked that ques-

ion. Why there is, and that's one of the reasons why I would not have you go up yonder. He keeps a life-preserver in the pocket of his dressing-gown, and when the time comes, he ups with it, and strikes at the air.'

'It's very odd, and, as you say, Mrs. Maude, very sad too,' said Steen reflectively. 'Mr. Blissett doesn't drink, does he?'

'No, Sir; not to hurt—and for the matter of that, he don't eat neither. It's a wonder to me how, without eating or sleeping, he keeps himself alive. He don't even do his painting now, which you know he used to say was meat, drink, and clothing to him. That is, with the exception of taking the likeness of that young person' (here the housekeeper drew herself up), 'which I think he might better have left alone. It is that baggage who has turned his head, or helped to turn it.'

In her characteristic indignation against this designing creature, Mrs. Maude forgot her caution, and raised her tones.

'Who is that? Who are you talking to, Mrs. Maude?' cried a hoarse and hollow voice from above stairs.

The housekeeper turned white, and threw up her hands in dismay and terror.

'It is I, Sir, Charles Steen,' cried the young fellow boldly.

'Show that man the door, Mrs. Maude,' cried her master imperiously. 'I told you he was not to be admitted.'

'I have something to say to you, Mr. Blissett, of great and pressing importance,' urged the visitor.

'Mrs. Maude,' said the hollow voice, after a short pause, 'if he does not go, send for a policeman. I will give him in charge for felony.'

'Yes, send for a policeman,' repeated Charles coolly, but loud enough for Mr. Blissett, who was leaning over the banisters, to catch every word. 'I also have something to say to *him*.'

'O, pray—pray, go, Mr. Steen,' pleaded the house-keeper in a low voice. 'This will only make poor Mr. Frederick worse.'

'What are you saying down there?' cried the painter suspiciously. 'If you have really something of importance—perhaps some message to deliver—I will hear it myself.—Come up, Sir.'

'O, take care,' whispered Mrs. Maude.

'Never fear,' answered Steen in the same tone.—'I am coming, Sir.' And he ran swiftly up to his late patron's room.

It was a large and gloomy apartment, with a huge old-fashioned bed, with a canopy fit to cover a body lying in state; every article of furniture similarly clumsy and solid, and with nothing to remind one of the refined, if somewhat eccentric taste of its present tenant, save one frameless picture, propped upon the mantelpiece, which was the portrait so recently executed of Eloise Bird. With his back to this, Mr. Blissett was standing, attired in a long dressing-gown, which hid his gaunt and wasted limbs; his arms were folded, so that one hand supported an elbow, and the other his chin; and he regarded the intruder, as he came in and closed the door behind him, with a suspicious and malignant look.

‘So you are come back again, Charles Steen, like a bad shilling, are you?’

‘I *am* come back, Sir,’ returned Charles coldly, ‘but not to trouble you beyond a few minutes. And as for your uncivil metaphor, that reminds me to say that I have something here of yours, which I took away by accident, and now beg leave to return to you.’

He took the ancient coin out of his pocket, and placed it upon the dressing-table, at the same time narrowly watching the painter’s face. Always pale, and of late almost a dead white, it suddenly turned livid; the lips twitched spasmodically, the eyes seemed to shrink from the object thus presented to their gaze.

‘Well, Sir?’ gasped he.

‘The coin is yours, is it not, Mr. Blissett?’

‘No.—Yes.—Where did you find it?’

‘In your own waistcoat-pocket, Sir. Part of the suit you were so good as to furnish me with on the night I first entered your service. There were two spots upon it—of iron-mould, I suppose—which seemed to offend you exceedingly, for you bade me burn it; and when I told you there was some silver in it—for I had only felt the piece just then, and did not know but that it was current money—you cried out that I was to burn that too.’

‘Well?’ said the painter slowly, the expression of his eyes, which were now squinting horribly, changing from abject fear to their old look of malice. ‘And being so dutiful, you disobeyed me, did you not, in both particulars?’

‘I am glad to say I did, Sir.’

'You are most frank indeed,' sneered the painter; 'and may I ask (if you had any reason except that pleasure in disobeying me, which you always feel) why?'

'Because, if I had not preserved the coin, I should never have learned its history—I mean, how it chanced to come into your possession.'

'And how was that?'

'That is the question which I have come to-day from Allgrove—by the road past Burslem Bottom, which you know so well—to ask of *you*.'

With three rapid strides, Mr. Blissett gained the door, locked it, and took out the key.

'You are a very foolish and imprudent young man indeed,' said he, showing his faultless teeth, and thrusting his right hand into his pocket. 'The worth to a poor man of a good story lies in his being able to retail it to others. You, however, in this case will never have the opportunity.'

'If I had, Sir, I should not take advantage of it,' returned Steen with meaning.

'It is a little late to be magnanimous, my young friend,' answered the painter contemptuously, 'when you have put your head in the lion's jaws. If you could only tell what I am thinking of now, you young fool.'

'I *can* tell, Sir. You are thinking of something which you have not only thought of once before, but put it into effect. But it would cost you this time very dear. Do you suppose that I am come here trusting to your *mercy* for my safety? I should as soon look for that in a wild cat.'

‘To what, then, in the devil’s name, *do* you trust?’ exclaimed the painter furiously.

‘To your indisposition to be hanged. At the office of your late brother’s lawyer, there lies a sealed packet, with a statement of *what I know*, to be opened and acted upon if I do not return from your house within the hour. You will then be put upon your trial for *two* murders instead of one.’

‘May you rot, limb from limb!’ cried the painter, drawing a chair close to the door, and seating himself upon it. ‘What is it you want, you devil?’

‘Confession; and to the living, so far as it can be made, Restitution.’

‘Ay, and revenge,’ added the other with a ghastly grin.

‘No, Sir, not revenge,’ answered Charles earnestly. ‘I forgive you the base wrong you plotted against myself; nay, I have even still some lingering relics of gratitude towards you for the past, which of itself would prevent my giving you up to justice, although that, I own, is not the chief cause of—of——’

‘Of your clemency,’ interrupted the painter, with a bitter laugh. ‘The clemency of this workhouse pauper! This is rare.’

‘It is humiliating, I dare say, Sir,’ observed Steen coldly. ‘But the hangman’s rope would be more so. It is no use to bandy words. Here are ink and paper. If you will not set it down yourself, I will do so from your lips, and you will sign it. It will never, I solemnly assure you, be made use of, so long as certain conditions are observed by you.’

‘And what are they?’

'You must remain single; you must make over three-fourths of your income to Mrs. Blissett and her daughter; and they must never see your face.'

'These are hard terms, young Sir—except the last.'

'Doubtless they are, and yet more favourable than I have any right to offer. The alternative, too, at least, is harder. In screening you from it, I am even breaking the law.'

'And how do I know you *will* screen me after all?'

'I have told you one reason; the faint embers of gratitude for the past are still burning within me, although you did your best to tread them out; and there is another. I love your niece Christie, and your death by the hangman's hand would disgrace her.—And yet you shall do her justice'—for a gleam of triumph suddenly lit up the painter's face—'or, by Heaven, I will bear witness against you with my own lips. Come, Sir, I am waiting.'

'What for? What am I to tell you? Where am I to begin?'

'I want the story of how that coin came into your possession.'

With eyes cast down upon the floor, and looking crosswise at his shifting feet; with brows knit and lowering; and with his right hand stealing at intervals to the deadly weapon that he had concealed about him, Frederick Blissett began as follows:

'I hated my brother from the very first: if you want evidence of malice, it is there. I hated him when we were children together, and even before I was old enough to know the wrong of which he was the un-

conscious instrument. Everybody liked my brother Frank, because he was a good-natured fool, and could not see through them as I did. Nurses, servants, governess—they all liked him. His father doted upon him, and his father's friends of course took their cue from him. They knew, too, that Frank would be the heir. Because there was a year or two between us, he was born to wealth, and I to poverty. Only my mother loved me, and saw the injustice under which I writhed. I detested the home that held him—the place that was to be his hereafter, and not mine. I went to India a subaltern in a foot-regiment, while he was the young squire at Allgrove. He might have married as early as he pleased, for he had lands and fortune to descend to his children; but I—I had nothing but a few wretched hundreds, which were soon spent. I had tastes to gratify such as he never possessed—a horse to ride, and bacon and greens to eat, would have satisfied Frank. I fell in debt. He helped me (curse him!) with dribblets of that money half of which should have been mine. Yes, more than one time; a dozen times, if you like to write that down; and I only hated him the more. When he married, I got less help and more advice—more insolent impertinence, I call it. That was his wife's doing. She was wormwood to me. When I heard she was struck down by illness—life-long, irremediable—I wrote to express my sorrow; but I was glad. It was she who stood between me and my art. If I had had money, I should have done great things. It was my cursed poverty, debts, wretched worries (all her fault and his), which kept me down. Even as it was, I made a name. My

pictures—some of them at least—were praised and bought. Frank bought some, like the rest (as was but right, I should suppose, being my brother), and praised them too. But what was *that* worth? It was once told me that he said he bought them out of charity. Put that down, if you please. He, the boor, patronised me, the artist. For every cheque (if he had but known it), I sent him back a curse. But yet I never thought to kill him. It was the opportunity that first put that in my head.

‘I left the army, and after a short engagement in the Indian civil service, returned to England—came what he called “home.” But I had no home. It was insult to tell me that the house where Mrs. Blissett reigned could ever be such to me. She was not rude, but she was coldly courteous, suspicious of me, jealous of my talents, and affecting to consider that I had not treated Frank as he deserved. I had many debts, and I know she remonstrated against their being settled by her husband. They were settled, however, and I fell in debt again. How could I help it, who needed to have refinements (what *she* called “luxuries”) about me, and to whom pleasure was as the breath of life, and yet who was so poor? They had only one child, and Frank might have spared me more, but he did not. He proposed a composition, which would have been disgraceful to me. Otherwise—so his letter seemed to hint—I might go to jail.’

‘O Sir,’ interrupted Steen, ‘do not slander the dead; I read that letter, and it hinted no such thing.’

'It did not offer to pay the debt, Sir; and if it was not paid, the man Ashden, whom you met at breakfast in Clifford Street, would have put me into gaol without compunction. Then came Frank's fatal note—that invitation to come down to Newnham in the early morning, and hunt with him: then, afterwards, to accept his hospitality, and his wife's at Allgrove. You have read that too, and you remember it.'

'Indeed, I do,' said Charles, not without pity. It was piteous to behold this wretched man, worn to skin and bone, and with his sleepless eyes incapable of tears.

'I am sorry about it now, myself, Steen. If you will take my advice, you will even do without things that are necessary (pleasures that hypocrites call vices and so forth), rather than—rather than gain them, even though you only seem to right yourself in so doing, by the strong hand. Perhaps you need no such warning. Well, I did. Look at me; look at the hand that did it. If I hold it up against the candle—look! you can see right through it. It is no wonder. I see him every day, and all night long. I see the place where the thing happened. When I used to paint any scene or likeness, I forgot them when I began another, and I tried to do so with these; but it was impossible. I was obliged to paint them over and over again. You saw Burslem Bottom in my studio in Clifford Street, and recognised it; I know you did. I had suspected you before, and was angry with you for siding with my sister-in-law and niece; but from that moment I detested you. I feared

lest this very thing should somehow come about which has happened to-day. In hopes, however, that you might not have identified the sketch, I sent you back to Morden Hall by another line, so that the real scene should not be presented to you, and so recall my picture; and I went to the railway station to make sure that you had obeyed me. But from that hour I made up my mind to crush you. That Morris was a detective, whom I hired from Scotland Yard, to catch you tripping. He believed what he saw, and is not to blame, except for being a fool. What fools there are in the world, and how they get on, while men like me, with talent, genius—— Bah! where was I?’

‘You were speaking of your brother’s note.’

‘True. He wrote to say that his groom would be sent on over-night, so that I guessed he would be alone, and I well knew the long lonely way which he would have to ride. On the previous evening, then, I feigned indisposition, and retired early, leaving strict orders that I was not to be disturbed. Then, watching my opportunity, I left the house unobserved, bought the old suit of clothes of which you spoke, and disguised myself—you know that I have always materials for that, which I use with my models. My habits were so irregular, that even if I had been missed, it would not have excited comment; but I was not missed. I went down by the night-train to Harbrook Station, with the intention (which I carried out) of returning by the other line. I waited about for hours in the fog and darkness; and when it was light enough—and having taken off the beard and

whiskers with which I had disguised myself—I sought Burslem Bottom, along which I knew Frank would have to pass. If he had been in company—if another sportsman had been with him, then I should have stolen away, and returned to town at once with my mission unfulfilled. I wish to Heaven he had been! but he was alone.—Give me brandy, Steen; there is some in yonder cupboard; you are putting me to the torture, my young friend.

‘Frank was surprised enough to see me stalk out of the morning mist and join him: but he had no suspicion. I had, it was true, taken a strange way of accepting his invitation; but then I was a strange fellow, and my brother, in particular, always averred that to him I was quite a Chinese puzzle. I should have thought my dress, my voice, my manner, would have struck anybody with apprehension, but they did not so strike Frank. He only observed that it was just like one of my mad freaks to have come out so far to meet him (for he thought I came from Newnham), and that I must surely be very tired. He got off his horse, and bade me mount and ride along the Bottom, while he walked by my side; and this gave me the advantage I was looking for. We chatted at first about indifferent things—at least he did—and I answered “Yes” or “No” as well as I could! but always on the watch for every opportunity. If I should miss my blow, or fail to render him helpless with it, I knew it would go hard with me, for Frank had the strength of two men such as I.

‘Presently, “Of course, you are coming home with

me after hunting? Maitland will have got your room all ready for you."

"No," said I gravely; "I cannot do that." He did not press me, for I let him see that I was resolved, but it made him sore. Then we began to talk of money matters, and he grew still more annoyed with me, which I was glad to see; I wanted to be vexed myself, for I could not strike him in cold blood. But Frank would not be drawn into a quarrel.

"Come," said he, "let us say no more about it, but agree to differ.—By-the-bye, I have a curious thing to show you, Fred—this coin. It was picked up at the Druid Stones by a tenant of mine." [A "tenant of his:" that was his grand style and I began to feel bitter against him, just as I wished to feel.] "I was going to show it to old Dr. Fungus, whom I am sure to see at the meet; but as you are here, and insist upon returning to town, I wish you would take it with you, and show it to some really good authority, for I know you are acquainted with such folks."

'He reached out his hand to give it me, and then turned his back to me to walk on.

"I will take it," cried I; "and do you take *that*"—and I struck him a frightful blow from behind with this.'

As the painter spoke these words, he pulled out from the pocket of his dressing-gown a formidable weapon made of whalebone and iron. 'See,' said he, sighing, as Charles gazed upon it with undisguised horror, 'how rusty it is at the end!—Well, Frank never moved or groaned; I had beaten in his skull;

but it seems, though I did not know it then, that a drop or two of his blood splashed up on my waistcoat, for my coat was open. Then I dismounted, and once more assuming my disguise, walked quickly to Chudleigh Station, and came up to town, when I was myself again. It was still early, and though the maids had unfastened the door, they were not in the way, when I let myself in, nor did they know that I had done so. If they had it would have mattered little. But I was solicitous (as I dare say you remember) to know that there had been no attempt to rouse me during the preceding evening. Altogether, I flattered myself I had secured an excellent *alibi*, if matters should ever have required it. I had dropped the coin into a side-pocket, and remembered nothing of it until I saw it in your hand to-day. That is my story—my confession, if you please to call it so. Do you want me to do more?’

‘Yes; I must trouble you to sign this, Mr. Blissett—and stay, there must be a witness.’ Charles rang the bell, while the painter unfastened the door, and Mrs. Maude came up from the hall, where she had been trembling for the last half-hour: she witnessed her master’s signature.

‘After what has passed, Mr. Steen,’ observed the painter significantly, when this was done, ‘it is not likely we shall meet again.’ And he held out his hand. Perhaps he thought that, in the housekeeper’s presence, Charles would not refuse it. But the young man answered sternly: ‘After what has passed, Mr. Blissett, I cannot take your hand.’

‘I must say, Mr. Steen,’ observed the housekeeper

as she let him out of the front-door, 'you were very hard upon master—no matter what has come and gone—not to take his hand when he offered it. And what is more (and very unusual with him), he let it be seen that he was hurt by it.'





CHAPTER XXX.

‘MARRIED AND A’.

OF course there was no longer a bar to the intercourse between Charles Steen and his friends at Allgrove ; and he wrote to tell them that Mr. Blissett had been persuaded to remove it. From Mr. Mellish he received a most friendly offer to come and stay with him at the rectory, and be prepared for the university : the expenses of college could, he assured him, be defrayed by a very small supplement to his present income, which he (the rector) would be very glad to advance, and could do so without any inconvenience. This money could be repaid as soon as Charles had gained any of those university emoluments, some of which at least he felt certain, from his own knowledge of his pupil's talents and acquirements, would fall to his share. An equally welcome communication arrived from the widow, pressing his immediate return to Allgrove, and urging him to let no foolish scruples stand in the way of his accepting the rector's proposal. ‘Your character for delicate feeling, my dear Charles,’ wrote she af-

sectionately, 'is established with all of us, and needs no further proof. We are lost in wonder as to how you could bring yourself to see Mr. Frederick again, and still more (not, indeed, that *he* has any right to be angry), how *did* you contrive to assuage his wrath? You may imagine what a string of questions is awaiting you here. You will be put to the *peine forte et dure*, I warn you.'

But events occurred which relieved the young fellow from this threatened embarrassment. Since there was no mention in the widow's note of any letter received from her brother-in-law (as in truth was hardly to be expected in so short a time), Charles could not persuade himself to leave town. On the fourth day he called in Grafton Street, not with any intention of molesting his unhappy patron, but by reminding him of his presence, to urge the accomplishment of what Mr. Frederick had undertaken to do.

The blinds were drawn down over every window, and Mrs. Maude showed a face almost as white as that which was lying above-stairs in her master's room.

'He is gone, Mr. Steen,' sobbed the housekeeper, with shaking head: 'he passed away only last evening like a lamb.'

'Dead!' exclaimed Charles with horror; for although, when he had last seen his patron, he looked fearfully ill, the gulf between life and death seems always wide.

'Yes, Sir: he grew worse and worse from the hour you left; not fitful and violent, as before, but weaker and weaker. I know you had much to forgive him, Mr. Steen, for he told me so; but you would have for-

given him, if you could have seen him at the last. He bade me tell you with one of his old smiles, that though he had not led a useful life, he had saved a lawyer's bill by dying. All his bitterness was poured upon himself, poor soul.—Would you like to see him, Sir ?'

'Yes.'

The dead man might have been taken for the very type of Death, so sharply showed his bones and shrunken limbs through the coverlet under which he lay ; so sunken were the once restless eyes in their hollow graves.

'It was his wish, Sir, he bade me tell you, for you would understand it, to be buried in town, and not in the family vault at Allgrove.'

'I understand : and it shall be done. Did he say more ?'

'He wished you to burn some documents, which would be useless, so he said, when he was once dead ; and—let me see—yes, there was one more very curious message ; but I hardly think he could have been in his right mind, poor man, when he gave that : it was almost with his last breath.'

'What was it ?'

'You were to destroy some picture ; but I could not rightly gather which it was.'

'Not that one on the mantelpiece ?'

'O no, Sir ; certainly not that. He liked it too well. Let us hope, because it was his last, and not on account of the young person, for the less he thought of *her* the better, we may be sure. It was some picture down at Morden Hall, I fancy. Is there

one there as has got a bishop in it, for I heard him mutter "the bishop," although I could catch little more ?'

'There is,' said Steen, somewhat startled. 'I will see that his wish is carried out.'

'Perhaps you would like to seal up his things, Sir, on behalf of the family ?'

'I am sure they can trust everything to you, Mrs. Maude ; and I will take care to let them know how faithfully you served their—— Mr. Blissett.'

'He was a faithful friend to *me*, Sir, whatever he may have been to others, Mr. Steen ; and I do believe that what was bad in him was not wholly his own fault.' And the housekeeper pointed with significance, though not irreverently, to the broad white forehead.

'I do believe that too,' returned Charles solemnly. 'God forgive him !'

'Amen !' said the housekeeper, again dissolved in tears, as they left the chamber of death. 'He always used to settle my little account quite regular, even when he was at his poorest. If you are writing, Sir, you will please to give my respectful duty to the family at the Hall.'

Mr. Mellish came up to town to assist Charles in superintending the late Mr. Blissett's affairs, and they two were the only mourners at his funeral. He had no male relatives whatever, and the estate being left with remainder to female heirs, Christie became a very rich young lady. This did not, we may be sure, make the least difference in her behaviour towards Mr. Steen, nor her regard for him, and, indeed, the rector always

described her, to her great indignation, as being 'exceedingly affable' to everybody. Nor did riches make any alteration in the widow's conduct towards her favourite. He was as welcome at the Hall—to which the mother and daughter removed in a few weeks—as he had been at the cottage, and dropped in quite as often during the university vacations. Three years' further acquaintance only increased the widow's affectionate regard for him. As for the rector, he seemed to have adopted him as his own son.

His college course concluded, Steen took high honours, and would without doubt have gained a fellowship. But this laurel (much to Mr. Mellish's disappointment) he did not reap; a fellowship being a somewhat useless piece of preferment in March to a young gentleman who is going to be married in May. For that a marriage was arranged between the heiress of Morden Hall and Mr. Charles Steen, a young man who had no 'position,' and whose very parentage seemed to be a matter of uncertainty, was known (and condemned) throughout the county. It was enough (said the county) to make the old squire (who had always had a proper pride) turn in his grave. Dr. Fungus, of course, was charmed, since the county was disgusted: but Mr. Mellish was charmed also, and fought for his protégé over many a dessert-table, tooth and nail.

Very few had the courage to find fault with him in the presence of the widow. To them who did—it was a pity, she coolly observed, that no remonstrances had been made when she first gave encouragement to the young fellow at the cottage; for

the fact was that her list of visitors had been very limited at Rill Bank, whereas it was now large enough. The public interest in her and hers had waned and increased in suspicious proportion with her means, and she valued it accordingly.

'So it's quite a love-match, I understand, Mrs. Blissett,' observed a female gossip, who had on one occasion been admitted to her boudoir (for the widow had been for some time improving in health, and was now greatly better)—'quite a romance, I do declare!'

'Well, no, Madam,' answered the widow drily; 'it is rather a matter of convenience, you see. Mr. Steen had the management of the place when my brother-in-law had it, and he understands all about our affairs. In fact I shall save a great deal of money *per annum* by the connection.'

Something might be due to the irritation of illness, but (although the above was an extreme case) the widow was certainly both short and sharp with her interlocutors upon the question of her daughter's marriage; while their opposition seemed only to render her future son-in-law a greater favourite with her than ever.

'I love you, Charles, not only on your own account,' she once said to him, 'but also because you banished from my mind a wicked thought, which else—now that he it wronged is dead—would have made me very miserable.'

'All that I ask of you in return, my dear Madam,' answered he with tender gravity, 'is, that you never hint at it even to myself again. Imagine what distress, if it ever got to her ears, such a terrible fancy would

cause to our darling Christie ; not to mention what ill-natured and unpleasant gossip it would give rise to, did it get abroad.'

Thus did he endeavour to make assurance doubly sure with respect to that dread secret of which he was now the sole depositary ; and it was kept a secret to the end.

The wife of Charles Steen never learned by what foul play her father had been made away with, and far less by whose kindred hands. That was one of the unknown blessings for which she had to thank her husband. But she had plenty of known ones. He made the old Hall a happier home to her than it had ever been, and the children she bore him linked her heart to his still closer. He was a man (perhaps *the* man) who lived under the same roof with his mother-in-law without a quarrel. Even the 'county' got by degrees to acknowledge that their prejudices against that 'adventurer,' as they called him, had been groundless. He hunted ; he shot ; he occupied in due time his seat on magisterial bench with modesty and intelligence ; he went twice to church on Sunday ; he could drink port wine ; he had no 'advanced views.' He was not an idle man ; he looked after matters with his own eyes, knew all his tenants personally, and took care that even the poorest should be lodged like Christian folk. He was as kind as just, but he was never patronising ; he remembered the time when he had once had a patron himself.

Mrs. Blissett, as we have said, is much less helpless than she used to be, and in the atmosphere of love that again surrounds her in the persons of her children

and grand-children, has recovered much of her old cheerful ways and spirit.

The rector grows more mellow, but is otherwise unchanged. He was godfather to the first arrival, and insists upon being an *ex officio* or honorary sponsor to all the rest of the progeny of Charles and Christie.

Dr. Fungus looks exactly the same as he has done any time these twenty years, except that in the distance he appears slightly brighter; the fact is, he has been compelled to purchase a new blue umbrella, the old one having been blown not only inside out but clean away in a gale upon the downs, that almost whisked off the pony. Charles, who would otherwise like the old fellow well enough, is always in some dread when he visits Allgrove, for he is pretty sure to allude to the inquest, and to reiterate his own opinion that there was murder done.

Mr. Frederick's wishes concerning the destruction of the fratricidal picture at the Hall were carried out by Steen's own hands. He gave out, as his reason for behaving so ruthlessly to Stanislaus and Boleslaus, that the painter, dissatisfied with his own work, did not desire that an example so discreditable to his genius should be retained; an idea not at all out of character with him who was supposed to have entertained it. To the widow and Christie, this reason was intelligible; but the destruction of so much paint and canvas was debated a good deal among the servants at the Hall. More than one of them, without knowing anything of the story told in the picture, had recognised the likeness that existed between 'the party with the 'atchet' (Boleslaus with his battle-axe)

and the painter himself, and even perhaps surmised that that might have had something to do with the thing being destroyed.

'But there, who could account for any whim of Mr. Frederick's, who had always had a bee in his bonnet, and no small one neither?'

This was a reflection which Charles himself was at last able to indorse. The longer he lived that life of quiet, uneventful domesticity, the more monstrous and inexplicable did the crime of his dead patron appear to him, except upon the ground of insanity. He sometimes thinks, that if Dr. Fungus had had his way, and the deed had been brought home to the doer, that the painter would have been acquitted upon that plea.

In a certain cabinet in his library, there are two objects which Mr. Steen keeps carefully under lock and key. The one is a portrait of a very beautiful young woman, which, 'under the circumstances' (for he has revealed them to his wife), Christie thinks it is just as well should remain where it is, lest it should lead to embarrassing questions; 'and besides,' she 'really does not see anything particular to admire in the girl's face.'

The other is a defaced and ancient coin, of the existence of which Christie knows nothing; but which, at times, her husband, when he is alone, takes out of a secret drawer, and pores over for many a minute. As he gazes on it, it is once more a magic disc. It takes him back from the smooth level of his daily life into the great battle of the world, from which he retired so early; he is once

more in the thick of the struggle ; poverty, and vice, and crime are again around him, in garbs that, to the easy and well-to-do, seem fantastic and unreal. He is in that region of flesh and blood romance, which they who have read little of the book of man denominate the Sensational. But of all the personal associations which are conjured up at the sight of it, his old patron stands pre-eminent : that in that coin lies the secret of his own success in life, is nothing—it also contains the secret of the Open Verdict.

THE END.



